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Journalists like Samiullah Mahdi, editor-in-chief of the Afghan outlet Amu TV, have continued critical reporting outside their home countries

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MICHAEL ROBINSON CHAVEZ; ILLUSTRATION BY MATT CHASE

“People Have Been Misled A Lot By Truth-Generating Institutions”

Harvard Kennedy School professor **Archon Fung** on partisanship, polarization, and mistrust

Archon Fung is the Winthrop Laflin McCormack Professor of Citizenship and Self-Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, as well as a co-director of the Transparency Policy Project at HKS’s Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation. His research explores the policies and practices that deepen the quality of democratic governance, with a focus on public participation, deliberation, and transparency. He has written several books, including “Full Disclosure: The Perils and Promise of Transparency” and “Empowered Participation: Reinventing Urban Democracy.”

Professor Fung spoke to Nieman Fellows in February about partisanship, mistrust, and the media’s role in democracy. Edited excerpts:

On how and why mistrust forms

We seldom have direct access to the truth. The only way that we know whether these things are true or not is by people that we trust helping us to find out.

There are many, many pieces of disagreement on what is true and what is not that has this fact pattern of being highly polarized. One is, who won the election? Another one is whether climate change is happening or not, and whether it poses a significant risk. Democrats and Republicans are highly polarized about that. Of course, Democrats and Republicans remain highly polarized about how much of a threat Covid-19 is and was to society, and to them personally. These are facts out there, one way or another, but people are very, very polarized about them.

We can’t act very effectively on solving huge social problems like how to move forward on climate change because we have fundamental disagreements about whether it’s happening, how much risk it poses, how to deal with a pandemic, and how to reasonably debate among different perspectives about how to deal with the pandemic.

I think an even deeper problem than partisan polarization about truth is partisan polarization about the institutions that we used to rely upon to tell us what is true or not.

About 10 percent of Republicans have a great deal of trust in the media, whatever that means to them. About 30 percent of Democrats have a great deal of trust in the media, whatever that means to them. It is very, very polarized, but the levels for both are pretty low.

Somewhat more surprising to you, maybe, that hits close to home for me is that Americans are very, very polarized about whether colleges and universities have a net beneficial effect on the country. Right now, a little bit more than 30 percent of Republican identifiers think that colleges and universities — higher ed — has a net positive effect on the country as a whole. Whereas, Democrats double that: High 60s think that colleges and universities have a net positive effect.

Another important truth-generating institution in our society is science. Republicans and Democrats are very polarized on whether they can trust the scientific community a lot or not. About 32 percent of Republicans think that they can trust the scientific community a great deal, whereas, 70 percent of Democrats think that they can trust the scientific community a great deal.

If you’re a professional journalist, you might be outraged about the media statistics. If you’re left of center generally, you might be outraged because we feel like we live in such a post-truth environment, and who are these people that are

“
An important strategy for a democratic society is for everyone to become more responsible participants

discarding the truth and truth-generating institutions?

I have much more sympathy for people who distrust these truth-generating institutions even though I am a tenured professor in one of them. A reason is that people have been misled a lot by truth-generating institutions. Right now, we think of the big lie as the 2020 election was stolen from Donald J. Trump.

I invite you to make a list of other big lies that have occurred in our recent lifetime. One big lie is that people disagree about whether climate change is happening.

Another big lie is that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. That big lie cost untold treasure. That is actually a good reason to distrust the mainstream media.

Another big lie was the economic consensus before the financial crisis. That there’s nothing really to see here. Don’t worry about this huge run-up in housing prices. I don’t know whether that one was willful or not.

A medium size lie, [which] was a good reason to distrust the scientific community, was the WHO and Anthony Fauci at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic saying that masks won’t protect you. There’s a generous version of that, which is that they were trying to get the science right and they didn’t think it was an airborne disease and so on.

There is a big lie version of that which is they thought it might be transmitted, but they thought they couldn’t trust you not to hoard masks because first responders and frontline medical people needed them. They couldn’t trust you and me to do the right thing.

I’m really trying to pick a scab here and be provocative by saying part of the reason is that we have been culpable in perpetrating many prior big lies, and so people are right to have a fair amount of skepticism about us.

On the internet and the mass media era

I certainly was one of the techno-utopians earlier on in the ’90s. The techno-utopian part was the part that really didn’t like [the media]. You guys are the gatekeepers. I was a techno-utopian, [thinking], “These people shouldn’t be gatekeeping. Let’s crash through it.”

And we got that. That’s what the Internet did. The gates are wide, wide open. Before social media, in the glory days of mass media, in media and in politics, the



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aperture of debate was very, very narrow.

If you look at the years roughly from Carter to Obama term one, the choices on offer in mainstream political debate and among the two parties are between vanilla and French vanilla ice cream. There’s massive agreement on the desirability of globalization, that the welfare state should be much smaller than it is. There just wasn’t much debate. Then the gates get crashed open, and the aperture of debate becomes very, very wide.

From the techno-utopian perspective, I think what we got wrong — very, very wrong — is at least from the MIT precincts and Silicon Valley precincts, a big part of the underlying ideology is a kind of libertarianism. If you crash through the gates, if you liberate people, good stuff will happen. What we didn’t anticipate and what a libertarian can’t really deal with very easily is the problem of individual responsibility.

There [are] many, many bad parts, I think, of the mass media era, but the good part is not freedom of expression, it’s you guys. It’s a set of professionals who have a professional ethic and a set of skills that really compels you to get things right to try to understand all of these different perspectives, put it together, and tell your

readers and viewers a story in which they can understand the arc of the day’s events in society.

The main effect of social media is that you guys are speaking a little bit less and all of us are speaking a little bit more. We don’t have those norms, and we don’t have that sense of responsibility.

The libertarian doesn’t have really a way of thinking about, what if 90 percent of the speakers out there are just irresponsible? They don’t care about truth. They care more about amplifying messages that make them feel good. They don’t care about harm that results from the things that they say or that they amplify.

A super important strategy for a democratic society is for everyone who’s participating in the public sphere to become more responsible participants and more responsible citizens in the public sphere.

On the media’s role in democracy

After World War II, in the first part of the 20th century [there] was another revolution in communication. Radio, soon to be television, a little bit later, film.

Many people in Europe and the United States were absolutely persuaded, and they probably were right, that these new communication technologies were

terrible for democracy, and indeed, that they’ve given rise to the fascist powers — Mussolini, Hitler [were] very adept users of the new media, much like some of the popular or populist authoritarians today.

They said in Europe and in the United States, what are we going to do? Can we bend the arc so that these super-dangerous technologies, dangerous for democracy, become conducive to democracy?

Henry Luce, who [was] the owner of Time [and] Life magazine, creates this Hutchins Commission. Luce thought that the commission would say, “Well, freedom of speech is the American way,” and that’s what we need to double down on, but they didn’t say that.

They said that it’s the job of media organizations and concentrated media in the United States, but probably also other Western societies, to do what they need to do to inform citizens so that they can be responsible citizens and support democracy rather than mislead them, or confuse them, or polarize them.

In order to do that, it’s going to cost these companies a lot. They’re going to have to facilitate the creation of a whole profession called journalism. If it’s a profession, you’ve got to pay people a fair amount of money so that they can make a living.

Your primary responsibility, even though you’re a capitalist corporation, is to tell the day’s events in ways that support democratic citizenship.

When the profit motive comes into clash with doing that job, you got to do the job and subordinate profits. If your best reporters write a story that’s very critical of your largest advertiser, guess what? You got to run the story. That’s the norm obviously violated a lot in the breach, but that was the norm and everybody understood it to be so.

Where’s our Hutchins Commission? Where’s our commission that says that when the large search platforms and media platforms maximize on profit, it tends to generate these toxic effects for democracy, and these guys have to take one for democracy?

I don’t know what that would look like. I think it might look like a thousand engineers [at] each of these companies saying, “How can we tweak our algorithms to be good for democracy, and truth-seeking, and fostering civility and pluralism, rather than toxic, polarized conflict?” And enough people in the management suite to back those guys up. We just do not have that right now. ■

Supporting Quality Journalism that Connects with Local Communities

Lolly Bowean, NF '17, works to hold space in philanthropy for marginalized communities

In my early days as a reporter at the Chicago Tribune, in addition to covering breaking news, I was tasked with writing obituaries.

Writing one obituary in particular left an indelible impression on me. Joseph Haley was a public school teacher on the far South Side of Chicago who started the Jackie Robinson West Little League program. Yet, when I looked in our library archives, I couldn't find a single news story written about him.

I was astounded that someone could be such a dynamic hero in their community and never get the attention of the press.

That moment helped cement my mission as a journalist: to see the people, especially Black people, women, and people of color, who were too often dismissed and relegated to the margins.

I'm no longer in a newsroom, but that experience still shapes how I do my work as a program officer with the Creativity and Free Expression team at the Ford Foundation.

I see my role as not only supporting quality journalism that connects with local communities but as an opportunity to see,



Members of the Jackie Robinson West All Stars Little League team celebrate their U.S. Little League Championship in 2014. Joseph Haley founded the program in Chicago's South Side

uplift, and elevate the grassroots-level work that has long been done, but hasn't been historically supported by philanthropy. This is work that broadens perspectives and offers a balanced portrait of our communities.

During my Nieman year, I thought a lot about who gets to be a journalist, who gets to be a writer, and who gets to be a voice.

I've come to understand that like with anything, it's easy to keep doing the same thing and replicate the same results. If we want a media that is reflective of our entire country, we have to look in the places where we — as funders — aren't often expected.

In the same way that I went into communities looking for stories as a reporter, I'm entering regions looking for the organizations that have become relied upon for either providing news, important training, or more. I approach this work with a deep humility and respect, focused on listening and learning.

I often tell journalists that are telling important stories that are nuanced, that challenge old stereotypes, and that push against systems of oppression, to keep at it.

I see it as my job to be in a place to see that work when it becomes apparent. ■

At the Intersection of Journalism and Trauma

Lisa Krantz, NF '20, is on a quest to minimize the harm journalists do to trauma survivors

On a late October day, I sat on the floor of a temporary church building, poised to document the emotions of Sherri Pomeroy on what would have been the 15th birthday of her daughter, Annabelle Pomeroy, who was killed in a mass shooting in their church at the age of 14. It had not yet been a year since the shooting, but I had been documenting the congregation's recovery for 11 months.

At that moment, I decided to apply for the Nieman fellowship to study the intersection of journalism and trauma — specifically the relationships between photojournalists and the people they photograph during times of sustained trauma. During my Nieman year, I decided to change paths, and a year later I quit my full-time staff photographer job at the San Antonio Express-News and arrived as a first-year doctoral student at the

University of Missouri's journalism school, 24 years after I had last been in school as a grade-earning student.

From the church shooting survivors, I heard repeatedly about their negative experiences with journalists, especially in the immediate aftermath. I began this journey to study the experiences of people on the other side of the camera, what it is like for them when the worst moments of their lives are displayed on the front pages of print publications, websites, and television news, and they may not have even known they were being photographed or filmed.

AP PHOTO/CHARLES REX ARBOGAST, FILE

Channeling Lucille Ball

Dale Maharidge, NF '88, researched the television pioneer for Turner Classic Movies

In December 2020, during the heart of the pandemic shutdown, I flew to California and checked into a Sherman Oaks hotel. It was nearly empty of customers. A Pacific storm struck that night. I awakened at four in the morning and went out into a howling wind. Trees were down in the road as I drove toward Coldwater Canyon.

It was a good hour to channel the solitude of Lucille Ball at a low point in her career and life, before she found fame with "I Love Lucy," her hit 1950s television show.

I'd been hired by Turner Classic Movies to research and write scripts for two of 10 episodes for "Lucy," the third season of The Plot Thickens, "a documentary podcast about the movies and the people who make them."

I was still new to podcasting. My first one, "The Dead Drink First," was based on my book "Bringing Mulligan Home," on a man missing from my dad's WWII U.S. marine unit.

I was recruited for the Lucy podcast by my Columbia Journalism School colleague Joanne Faryon, the editor and writer on contract with TCM. Joanne teaches a popular podcast class, "Shoe Leather," at the school. I was excited to work collaboratively with a larger team assembled for the project.

One of the parts I was hired to research and script was episode five, which was



The fifth episode of "Lucy," the third season of the podcast The Plot Thickens, centered on Lucille Ball's life between 1940 and 1950 and her relationship with Desi Arnaz

about Lucy between 1940 and 1950. It was a dark time in Lucy's life. Desi Arnaz, her husband, was cheating. He was unhappy having his wife support him. One time a valet called him "Mr. Ball." It angered him. The couple spent very little time together.

In those days, Lucy was the "Queen of the Bs," low-budget films. They lived on "Desilu Ranch," a mashup of their names, in the San Fernando Valley. Desi played nights at Ciro's, the famed Sunset Strip nightclub. She worked days filming on studio lots.

At five in the morning, Lucy was fresh, driving south from Desilu Ranch. Desi was driving north. Tired. Heading home from Ciro's. Their commute took them over the mountains between Hollywood and the San Fernando Valley.

The canyon road is curving. Coldwater

Canyon at this hour in any era is desolate. On the drive up from the Lucy side of the mountain, the lights of the San Fernando Valley seemed very far away.

The only safe spot to park then and now is near Mulholland Drive.

"So we would meet at the top of Coldwater Canyon about five-thirty," Desi wrote in his autobiography. I got there at that exact time. I could imagine her parking. Waiting in the dark for Desi.

Now rain fell. I aimed a shotgun mic at the roof of the rental. Great ambi.

Was Lucy mad at Desi once again for his philandering?

Rain pounded harder on the car's roof. Or was she eager to kiss him?

The audio never aired in the podcast. It was cut from the script. But that's okay.

I needed to be there that night. ■

My first semester I wrote a paper titled, "Balancing the public's right to know and recording history while minimizing harm and preserving dignity," making an argument for a pool coverage-type system for covering mass shootings. My first writings about this were guided by the narrative writing class with Steve Almond at Lippmann House. The encouragement from Steve and the fellows who critiqued my writing was extremely influential in launching me on this path.

While my focus is the experience of the people whose stories we are trying to tell, I'm drawn to the experience of

photojournalists as well. I'm researching the cumulative impact of covering mass shootings on Texas-based photojournalists, secondary traumatic stress, and the possibility of moral injury after work-related trauma exposure. I'm also conducting research exploring where

photojournalists fit into the newsroom hierarchy, as they are absent from much of the academic literature on journalism, specifically in the Hierarchy of Influences model, a framework used to analyze five levels of influence on media content.

I started on this path to understand what I feel hurts journalists and hurts people being photographed and reported on in traumatic situations. Nobody debates that we need to cover these stories, but we should debate, and hopefully agree, there are better ways to do it, minimizing harm to both the people we report on and to ourselves as journalists. ■

AP PHOTO



HOW STATE FUNDING IS SUPPORTING LOCAL JOURNALISM

**In the face of federal
inaction, state-level
experiments to fund
community-based outlets
are expanding**

**BY CATHERINE BUNI
ILLUSTRATIONS BY MATT CHASE**

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The fellowship program through Berkeley is intended to help bolster local reporting and close the gaps in coverage.

The goal is, by 2025, to put 120 journalists in the field for three-year terms. These “journalists will be completely independent and operate without any connection to the government or influence from politicians,” says State Sen. Steve Glazer, co-sponsor of the legislation. “[W]e think the fellowship program is a model that can and will be replicated across the country.”

California isn't the only state testing public policy as a strategy for supporting equitable local news. Amidst an existential crisis in local journalism and the failure of the federal government to pass legislation, state-level experiments designed to support local journalism as a crucial public service are expanding, from New Jersey to California, New Mexico to Wisconsin, Illinois to Washington, and beyond. The approaches vary from state to state — in New Jersey, for example, lawmakers have set up a consortium to distribute public funds to news organizations; others are considering tax incentives to help keep newsrooms afloat — but the goal is largely the same: to innovate around different public funding models to help fill the hole left by shuttered news organizations.

Over the last two decades, about 2,500 local news operations have closed — more than 360 of them in the last three years under additional Covid-19 pressures. Roughly 70 million people live in a news desert — defined as a community that has one or no newspaper available or a place where residents don't have access to fact-based local news and information. Those hardest hit — the rural, poor, and communities of color — are left disproportionately cut off from quality local reporting, like coverage of their school board, for instance, or Covid-19 or other public health updates, or how the town government is spending their tax dollars.

Despite the disruption, public investment in local news remains woefully low, in the U.S. especially, where only \$3.16 per person is spent on public media, most of which goes to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to support local public television and radio stations, the affiliates that often carry NPR and PBS programming. For comparison, Germany spends more than \$142 per capita while Botswana spends \$18.38 per person.

Broad public awareness of the collapse of local news in the U.S. is likewise scarce. According to a 2019 Pew research study, 71 percent of Americans actually believe their local news outlets are “doing well financially.”



Without more public pressure to address the problem, passing meaningful policy is just that much harder. Yet, as supporters of public policy solutions recognize, and, as a 2019 Gallup/Knight study found, 86 percent of American adults believe everyone should have access to local news. Six in 10 “consider the local newspaper in their community an important symbol of civic pride,” Gallup/Night found. But this trust is fragile, with only 29 percent of Americans surveyed saying they trust the news, placing the U.S. at the bottom of the 46 countries surveyed in 2021 by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Given the gridlock in D.C., it's unlikely that Congress will pass significant federal funding or meaningful reform for local journalism anytime soon. The Future of Local News Act, introduced by Democrats in May of 2021, aimed to create a 13-member panel to study the complex landscape and recommend ways Congress can act, but looks like it's going nowhere. Likewise, the Local Journalism Sustainability Act, which would have allocated \$1 billion for local journalism, died along with the Build Back Better bill. It would have supported local journalism in three key ways: by giving individuals up to a \$250 tax credit for paying for

a local news subscription; a tax credit of up to \$5,000 for small businesses to advertise with local outlets; and a payroll tax credit for news organizations to help them hire and keep staff. With Republicans having retaken control of the House of Representatives, the window has likely closed to pass the Journalism Competition and Preservation Act, which would allow larger outlets that earn more than \$100,000 per year to negotiate with or sue tech giants like Meta, Twitter, YouTube, and Google for compensation for use of their news products. (One obvious place to start, sources say, would be to update the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which is federally funded and already delivers programming to households around the country through local television and radio stations, though the money allocated to the entity in the fiscal 2025 budget falls short of its funding request by about \$30 million.)

Yet, there is long-standing precedent for federal support of journalism, says Harvard legal scholar Martha Minow, author of “Saving the News: Why the Constitution Calls for Government Action to Preserve Freedom of Speech.” In 1792, the Postal Service Act subsidized newspaper access nationwide. And it was the government that issued the first transcontinental telegraph rights in the 1860s to public lands. It also instituted federal requirements that cable service carry local stations as well as mandates for public educational broadcasting and universal telecom service.

Public policy, whether at the federal, state, or local level, isn’t the only, or even the most stable, long-term strategy for saving and sustaining local news long-term, nor for creating a truly equitable news landscape, Minow and other sources are quick to say. Innovation involving the tech sector, universities, libraries, advertisers, donors, subscribers, or events are others. In particular, sources say, the growth in philanthropy is notable. According to Sue Cross, executive director and chief executive officer of The Institute for Nonprofit News, the number of nonprofit newsrooms doubled from 2017 to 2021. INN is projecting the number to reach more than 600 by 2026. Since 2019, The American Journalism Project has raised \$37 million and funded 33 news operations, for instance.

But these important funding strategies alone, so far, are struggling in a number of ways. In its “Index 2022: The State of Nonprofit News,” INN reported, “Foundation funding, a major fuel supplier for public service journalism, remains concentrated in the larger, national and global news outlets — and remains elusive for smaller, local organizations.” For instance, only about five percent of philanthropic dollars disbursed between 2010 and 2015 reached local news organizations, according to the University of North Carolina and The Knight Foundation. Of the estimated 400 local news sites launched in communities that lost a newspaper in the last 15 years, “only two of the outlets are in the 171 counties in the U.S. that have no newspaper,” the study



71%

of Americans believe their local news outlets are “doing well financially”

SOURCE: Pew Research study, 2019

concludes. And only a small fraction of those dollars went to newsrooms supporting communities of color and economically disadvantaged areas. The Democracy Fund estimates that of the \$1.2 billion in journalism grants disbursed between 2009 and 2015, only six percent “went towards efforts serving specific racial and ethnic groups” and only seven percent “went towards efforts serving economically disadvantaged populations.” However, there are some organizations working to change this. Nancy Lane, CEO of the Local Media Association and Local Media Foundation, a nonprofit working with some 3,000 local media operations, notes that last year 47 percent of her organization’s philanthropic funding — or nearly \$3.9 million — went to “programs focused on reaching specific racial, ethnic, or LGBTQ+ communities.”

If the public values local journalism, if local journalism is a public good, and if there is a long tradition of public policy in support of journalism, advocates say we must push harder on public policy strategies in response to the crisis. In the absence of a viable business model, they argue, local journalism deserves public support, whether from direct financial funding, tax assistance, or other approaches, in addition to these other critical, evolving means. The impasse at the federal level means that states find themselves in a position to test solutions of their own, says Minow, citing an observation Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis made almost a century ago: “It is one of the happy incidents of the federal system that a single courageous state may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country.”

Here are some states doing exactly that.

CALIFORNIA

In California one mid-November afternoon, Christa Scharfenberg, project director for the California Local Journalism Fellowship Project, took time for a call. It’d been barely two months since Newsom had signed off on \$25 million for the fellowship program at Berkeley, and Scharfenberg, who’d come from the American Journalism Project, was busy.

In the few weeks she’d been on board, she’d already met with leaders “all over the state,” from The Los Angeles Times and McClatchy and KQED to mid-sized and small operations like The Press Democrat in Santa Rosa and El Tímpano in Oakland, to nonprofits like Cal Matters. Since then, she’s also met with ethnic media outlets, journalism heads at community colleges, and smaller nonprofits around the state, she says, to build awareness, solicit feedback, and answer their questions about the program.

The project will prioritize small and undercapitalized organizations, but, with public funding, says Scharfenberg, “there’s an imperative that out of the gate, it’s for all of California.” She notes that bigger organizations “are interested in supporting smaller markets,” perhaps by providing a source of centralized editing support or coordinating reporting for the project’s fellows.

Scharfenberg developed the application process for both news organizations and fellows with the goal of making it easily accessible for under-resourced newsrooms, a key to promoting equitable distribution, she says. There also will be a rigorous research and assessment component to the program, and, to help guarantee fellows a long and sustainable journalism career, an on-campus training and mentorship program. Fellows will be UC employees and receive a starting compensation package of \$65,000, which includes benefits. (Newsrooms will contribute between \$5,000 and \$25,000 a year, depending on the size of their budget.) If all goes well between the newsroom and the fellow, there would be a path to a third-year renewal for 10 to 15 fellows in each cohort.

Newsroom leaders in the state, like Paulette Brown-Hinds, president of Black Voice News, an online publication based in Riverside, see the program as an opportunity to expand their staffs and improve coverage. “More journalists for us,” says Brown-Hinds, “means there will be fewer of our stories left untold, more reporters to hold our elected officials and public servants accountable, and more facts in the public conversation to combat the current plague of disinformation that challenges all our communities.”

When asked to address skeptics who say 120 journalists over three years is a small gesture in a state as vast as California, Steve Katz, Berkeley’s journalism school’s assistant dean, argues that you have to start somewhere. “We have heard this argument, ‘It’s a drop in the bucket. It doesn’t address monopoly,’” he says. “I don’t accept

that if we don’t solve all the problems, we aren’t doing something important.” In 2009, he points out, the Institute for Nonprofit Journalism had 27 founding organizations; today, there are more than 400.

NEW MEXICO

In New Mexico, Rashad Mahmood, executive director of the New Mexico Local News Fund (NMLNF), doesn’t accept those criticisms either. Mahmood, who has worked as a journalist in Egypt and a program coordinator for Generation Justice, a youth advocacy group, and for public radio station KUNM’s Public Health New Mexico reporting project, is looking to use public policy to double NMLF’s fellowship and internship program funds, used to pay recent graduates to work in local newsrooms for nine months at a time. The fellowship to date has placed 16 journalists, most of whom have remained in journalism in New Mexico, Mahmood says. They have covered student protests for better pay and insurance benefits at UNM in Albuquerque, the state’s launch of a new digital program designed to help families find child care, 2022 Picuris Pueblo Tribal Council election results in Taos, and midterm election results in Las Cruces and Doña Ana County, to name just a few examples.

In an October column for The Santa Fe New Mexican, headlined “\$25 million California appropriation will aid N.M. news,” Mahmood called for widespread public support. In January, New Mexico’s Senate Majority Leader Peter Wirth introduced a bill that would set aside \$200,000 to fund a local news fellowship program in 2024. (As of press time, the bill had not yet passed.) The funding could support newsrooms like KUNM, the public radio station housed at the University of New Mexico. KUNM has hosted NMLNF fellows, but the state funding would allow the station to cover stories across the state and help train the next generation of journalists in New Mexico. “It might allow us to access additional funds for training and conferences,” says Megan Kamerick, KUMN’s news director. “It could also help us add more staff. All these things are very challenging for us to fund as a small public radio station.”

Their current NMLNF fellow Jeanette DeDios has covered the need for funding for Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) schools like the To’Hajiilee Community School; impacts of the Indian Child Welfare Act on Native American children in New Mexico; and the importance of training law enforcement on how to identify potential Native American human trafficking victims.

New Mexico has more Native American representation than many other states, observes DeDios, a Native woman from the Jicarilla Apache and Navajo Nations, “but they still lack basic healthcare, education, and proper living conditions.” DeDios’ reporting, she and Kamerick say, brings attention to the issues Native Americans in New Mexico “face on a daily basis.”

In addition to California, Mahmood credits another



If there is a long tradition of public policy in support of journalism, advocates say we must push harder on public policy strategies in response to the crisis

state, New Jersey, for the cascade effect its early trail-blazing has inspired, by “raising the profile for the potential of state and federal support for local news.”

NEW JERSEY

In 2018, legislators passed the landmark New Jersey Civic Information Bill, making New Jersey the first U.S. state to pass policy in support of local news in crisis and allocate tax dollars for news outlets. It had taken coalition activists, led by Free Press, a nonprofit advocacy organization, some four years to get there. The bill created a 16-member nonprofit consortium, called the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, charged with distributing the public funds “with the mission,” according to Free Press, “of strengthening local-news coverage and boosting civic engagement in communities across the state.” The nonprofit is, in the words of Mike Rispoli, senior director of journalism policy at Free Press, “a first-of-its-kind” in the U.S.

To ensure a firewall between government and public interest, the bill requires the Civic Information Consortium to be comprised of representatives from universities, media outlets, community groups, journalists, local organizers, and students. True, Rispoli says, “it’s ridiculous” how unwieldy the process of determining who receives public funds can be with an interdisciplinary, inclusive 16-member nonprofit board. But the board is designed to ensure equitable distribution of the \$3 million in New Jersey’s 2023 Civic Information Fund. Today, 14 local news organizations are using New Jersey’s public funds.

To be eligible, applicants are required to partner with a collaborating university and demonstrate a clear benefit to the community. Rispoli says that could mean hiring a journalist for a specific beat, but it could also mean starting a training program for local journalists or launching an entirely new outlet. One recipient, Movimiento Cosecha, a national volunteer-based nonprofit, received \$85,000 over two years to work in partnership with Rutgers to create Radio Cosecha NJ, a Spanish-language radio station to serve New Jersey’s Spanish-speaking population that launched in January 2022. The station has covered social unrest in Peru, board of governors meetings at Rutgers, Covid-19 health information, and instruction on how to obtain drivers licenses.

The outlet also helped advertise Movimiento Cosecha’s 70 clinics to support people trying to access money New Jersey set aside for its residents who were not eligible for federal stimulus checks or Covid-19 relief funds because of their immigration status. “A lot of the community didn’t know it was available,” says Carlos Castaneda, Radio Cosecha’s director. Because applicants had trouble reaching state officials with questions about the program, which required detailed personal information to apply, many felt like the program was a scam, he adds. With Radio Cosecha advertising the clinics, which helped an estimated 700 people file for the funds, “they felt more trust.” The money from the Civic Information

A handful of states are taking first steps to build something new and more just. In the face of free market collapse, they are asking, how does local journalism survive and better serve the public?



Fund “has helped us amplify the needs of the community, but also the community’s resilience” and is allowing the station to purchase a vehicle that will serve as a mobile studio.

The Newark News and Story Collaborative, a nonprofit partnership between WBGO-Newark Public Radio, Free Press, and the Center for Cooperative Media, was founded in 2020 with the help of \$110,000 in state funds “to dive deeper into the information needs of Newark residents as we faced the onset of the coronavirus pandemic,” says Brit Harley, NNSC’s co-founder. Since its founding, the collaborative has launched Five Wards Media, an online outlet covering Newark, and has hosted 200 conversations and community forums. It has covered how to sign up for and speak at local council meetings, and is providing ongoing reporting on city-wide council meetings, local LGBTQ events, local food systems, access to public land, a nurse and medical technicians’ strike for better working conditions and contracts, and racial justice and policing. NNSC’s Covid-19 resource guide has reached some 10,000 people, and 44 residents to date have participated in its community media lab program, which trains and pays Newark residents to learn journalism and storytelling skills. The impact of this work is clear, Harley says: “Residents now identify us as a space where they can share their stories and lived experiences.”

The nonprofit Stories of Atlantic City (SOAC), a collaborative model that partners with community groups, existing media outlets, and government agencies, has used its public funds — nearly \$100,000 over two years — to create a seven-month training course at Stockton University. The program teaches residents how to report on local government entities like the city council, the school board, and the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority. The first cohort included 17 community members, a multilingual and cross-generational group, from backgrounds in social work, health care, education, the arts, and other sectors.

“Getting the grant enabled us to work on projects we’d dreamed about, but didn’t have support for,” says Christina Noble, SOAC’s inaugural project manager. Beyond SOAC’s reporting, the training fellows took away is important, Noble says. They learned how government works, the basics of journalism, and how to ask the right questions. All of this is shared beyond SOAC, with friends, family, colleagues, neighbors, she adds.

SOAC fellow Shalini Basu, a social worker and first-generation immigrant who grew up in Atlantic City, has used this training to cover veterans’ housing issues and food drives. “Atlantic City overall has a very negative image” in the news, Basu says, fed by media that isn’t local and doesn’t understand what day-to-day life is like in this coastal city of nearly 39,000 people. “We live and work in this community every day. Real people live here. We have a thriving art scene, a community where people look out for each other.” After years of leaving, young people are starting to come back and invest in local businesses, she says, adding that SOAC’s coverage touches on the full range of experiences in Atlantic City.

OTHER STATES

States are testing a range of strategies. Tax credits for subscriptions and payroll are on the table in Massachusetts, New York, Virginia, and Wisconsin. In Washington state, for instance, Attorney General Bob Ferguson has introduced a bill extending a tax break for news publishers that’s due to expire next summer.

In New York City and Chicago, officials have allocated city advertising dollars to struggling news outlets, an approach that Connecticut is now also considering. In Massachusetts and Illinois, legislators have passed bills creating commissions to study ways to fix their news deserts. New York appears poised to follow. “Each state is taking a slightly different approach,” says Steve Waldman, founder and chair of Rebuild Local News (RLN), a nonprofit advocating for community journalism that is closely tracking state-level policy. “To be honest, we’ll see which ones work politically.”

In states where direct subsidies might fall flat — according to the 2019 Gallup/Knight survey, Americans are “deeply divided” over subsidies for news organizations — tax incentives are showing promise. Wisconsin’s bipartisan proposal would allow businesses that advertise with local media to recoup up to half their costs up to \$5,000.

Among other approaches, RLN advocates for a mixture of tax incentives designed to get consumers buying subscriptions, small businesses to advertise with local outlets, and give organizations the stability to retain staff. But there are critics who observe that some forms of tax incentives, like philanthropic funding, are most likely to benefit those who already have significant resources, not the organizations or people who need them most. And, tax incentives don’t do much to help create news outlets from scratch in places with no local news organization at all.

Regardless of approach, advocates are most likely to find success, RLJ has observed, if they have broad coalition support, a lobbyist who has access to the governor’s office, a legislative co-sponsor who values bipartisanship, and a strategy that is as actionable — like a direct subsidy — as possible.

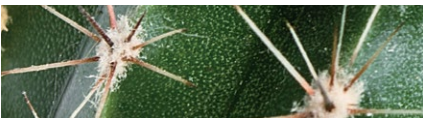
Whether public support comes from the federal or state government, or comes in the form of direct aid, subsidy, reform, or something else, it is critical that those who are writing legislation aimed at replenishing news deserts correct the historical inequities built into the system. “We can go down the list of ways in which the old-fashioned journalism didn’t entirely do what it needs to do and see that there are shoots of life that are pointing a new way,” legal scholar Minow says. “Cities and towns and states are laboratories not just for democracy but for innovation and for civic participation.”

A handful of states are taking first testing steps to build something new and more just. In the face of free market collapse, they are asking, how does local journalism survive and better serve the public? The results from these experiments will take years to become clear, but the cascade effect is already taking hold. Not long af-

Per capita spending on public media



GERMANY
\$142.42



FRANCE
\$75.89



JAPAN
\$53.15



AUSTRALIA
\$35.78



CANADA
\$26.51



BOTSWANA
\$18.38



SOUTH KOREA
\$14.93



UNITED STATES
\$3.16

SOURCE: “Funding Democracy: Public Media and Democratic Health in 33 Countries,” Timothy Neff and Victor Pickard, The International Journal of Press/Politics

ter California launched its fellowship, Bruce Pinkleton, dean of Washington State University’s Edward R. Murrow College of Communication, called Steve Katz at Berkeley to brainstorm. Pinkleton is working alongside Washington State Sen. Karen Keiser to draft policy there, and he was curious to hear the lessons learned so far.

Yes, there are other, and potentially bigger, solutions than public policy — philanthropy among them — as Minow and others make clear. And nobody knows what sustainable models the future holds. But if meaningful public policy is to be part of the solution, says Minow, “the way out of the log jam of getting a national policy is to actually amplify” efforts like California’s, New Jersey’s, New Mexico’s, and beyond. The states are where policy progress is often first made on such issues as energy, reproductive health, human services, or education. At the same time, adds Minow, “It’s all hands on deck here, and every kind of tool is necessary.” ■

REPORT FROM SUNNYLANDS

REVITALIZING
LOCAL NEWS WITH
NEW CAPITAL,
CREATIVITY, AND
COLLECTIVE ACTION



**A gathering of current and
prospective journalism funders
and practitioners seeks to
reinvent local news as civic
information in service of
communities**

BY JIM FRIEDLICH

ILLUSTRATION BY MATT CHASE

One year ago, Chicago Public Media announced the acquisition of The Chicago Sun-Times, a public radio station combining forces with a cherished hometown newspaper. The Chicago merger has created one of the largest nonprofit news enterprises in America, with nearly 200 journalists producing coverage that reaches one in three Chicagoans, according to CEO Matt Moog.

If Moog was the architect of the WBEZ/Sun Times combination, then MacArthur Foundation President John Palfrey was one of its principal builders. MacArthur was the lead investor in a reported \$61 million effort to support the growth and sustainability of the new organization. A broad coalition included 11 funders, among them the Knight Foundation, the Pritzker Traubert Foundation, Builders Initiative, and Michael Sacks, a previous co-owner of the Sun-Times. The speed and scale with which this capital raise came together was impressive, instructive to other communities in need of local news investment, and a kind of teaching moment for our field.

In January, Palfrey and his co-host, Chalkbeat co-founder and CEO Elizabeth Green, convened a gathering of roughly two dozen current and prospective journalism funders and practitioners at a conference facility at Sunnylands, the former Annenberg estate in Rancho Mirage, California, outside of Palm Springs. While not framed as such, Sunnylands was in effect an effort to model Chicago and other encouraging local funding collaborations at much grander national scale.

The Lenfest Institute, where I am executive director and CEO, was a part of the host committee of this summit, which involved advanced planning as well as input into a draft “Roadmap for Local News,” co-authored by Green, Free Press Senior Director of Journalism Policy Mike Rispoli, and City Bureau Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director Darryl Holliday. The roadmap — a work in progress — was published with an open, inclusive call for new input.

The roadmap reflects interviews with more than 50 leaders in the field to date and makes the case for big and bold action like we saw in Chicago. It is first and foremost a reframing of the issues and the opportunities surrounding local news in the face of a crisis in American democracy. Subtitled “An Emergent Approach to Meeting Civic Information Needs,” the roadmap frames the challenge and opportunity less as saving local news than reinventing and revitalizing civic information in service of communities. Among its key goals and recommendations:

More Money: Meaningfully increase national and local philanthropic funding for local journalism/civic information.

More Efficient Infrastructure: Leverage new and existing shared services or solutions providers serving multiple news organizations inexpensively and at scale.

Better Policy: Help create state and federal policy that improves the economics of local news.

The purpose of the Sunnylands convening was to begin to galvanize funders, news organizations, and supporting organizations to think and act much more aggressively. As MacArthur’s Palfrey framed it, the goal was “to pair great need with great opportunity, to do something more, something different, and something meaningful.”

I arrived at Sunnylands a bit apprehensive and left quite encouraged.

My apprehension was rooted in practical concerns over the prospective creation of a kind of mega-fund that might prove unwieldy, difficult to govern, or expensive in its own right.

A second concern was that efforts to build enabling infrastructure might take on an infrastructure of their own. This same logic of efficiency was a working principle of the newspaper chains of yesteryear, and their centralized services were often burdensome and inefficient.

Most funders seemed aligned in the view that coordinated effort toward common goals and funding of key priorities could best be accomplished through close communication and coordination rather than consoli-

dation into a kind of fund of funds. Federation not consolidation. Amy Low of Emerson Collective expressed it well, advocating for a “distributed” funding model that was both aligned and “decentralized,” much like the news business it seeks to support.

The Knight Foundation’s Jim Brady, a self-described “infrastructure geek,” made the case for efficient, nimble, on-demand “fractionalized services,” rather than a single source of news tools or centralized back-offices services.

The three-day sessions began with a scene setter by Nancy Gibbs, the long-time editor-in-chief of Time Magazine and now the director of Harvard’s Shorenstein Center. She flashed several familiar charts but framed them especially compellingly:

The first is the Thelma and Louise-like revenue cliff that shows the decline of commercial newspaper funding from nearly \$50 billion to less than \$10 billion since 2005. “This is what the apocalypse looks like,” she said, adding, “We are contending with the disruption of the entire ecology of information in this country and around the world.”

The second was a parallel chart showing the decline of working journalists in America: “Democracy needs journalism, and guess what, journalism needs journalists.”

Gibbs was one of several voices this weekend to suggest that the crisis in local news is aided and abetted by a lack of awareness that there is a problem in the first place. She cited Pew Research data that 70 percent of Americans believe their local news outlets to be “doing well” financially. “If people don’t know their house is on fire, good luck organizing a bucket brigade.”

This reframing of the conversation from saving the news industry to the broader imperative of civic information to enable a thriving democracy pervaded the weekend.

Despite all the challenges facing local news — or perhaps because of them — there are a growing number of instances in which creativity, capital, and community coalesce to rebuild local news. As of early 2023, there are relatively new investments of meaningful scale and ingenuity in Chicago (WBEZ/Sun-Times), Baltimore (The Baltimore Banner), Cleveland (Signal Cleveland), Pennsylvania (The Philadelphia Inquirer and Spotlight PA), Syracuse (Central Current), Santa Cruz (Lookout Santa Cruz and Santa Cruz Local), and many other communities large and small.

Each is a bit different. The Inquirer and Lookout operate as for-profit public benefit companies, while Cleveland, Baltimore, Spotlight PA, Chicago, and Syracuse are nonprofits. The Banner, The Inquirer, and the print version of the Sun-Times sell subscriptions; the others, including the digital Sun-Times, offer content for free but appeal for membership support. WBEZ merged with its hometown paper; The Inquirer sometimes competes for news and talent with its local public radio station; and the Central Current is housed in theirs.

No one size fits all. Each approach to local news is a kind of “model home,” open for replication by civic

investors in other like-minded communities. This syncs well with funders’ expressed views that they need a menu of investable local news models with tested impact and cases for support.

The spirit of the Sunnylands conversation was that of local news as a big tent rather than a mansion on the hill. There were voices like Holliday, co-founder of Chicago’s City Bureau, which has fielded over a thousand “documenters” to help cover government and school board meetings in seven cities, and Sarah Alvarez, the founder and editor-in-chief of Outlier Media, which provides civic news and information for Detroit. A growing group of civic information providers are advancing new definitions of who is a journalist, new practices in civic data and reporting, and most important, new levels of trust and engagement with under-served communities.

The group included John Bridgeland, former director of the White House Domestic Policy Council to George W. Bush, and now co-chair and CEO of More Perfect, “an initiative to protect and renew American democracy,” suggesting at least the possibility of bipartisan support for local news, a goal that has so far eluded recent legislative efforts.

The notion of a big tent extends to making the case to a much broader group of funders and on behalf of a growing array of local news and civic information alternatives — legacy BIPOC-owned media, start-up for-profit solutions, public media, nonprofit news, keeping or returning traditional hometown newspapers in or to local ownership, and more.

Despite the legitimate sense of optimism and momentum, the prevailing winds are still very much in our faces, underscoring the need for significant new investment and collective action. Half of American newspapers are owned by hedge funds or private equity, run to optimize the flow of cash not information. The most economically healthy part of local news — local TV — is often the shallowest or the most sensational.

Nonprofit news remains a promising but relatively small market, not only with respect to funding, but also, some would argue, in terms of consumer demand. Some promising experiments are still just that. The next few years will help determine the extent to which nonprofit organizations can truly fill the gap. Sunnylands reflected the nonprofit news field’s determination and served to accelerate its continuing strong spirit of collaboration.

One of the most refreshing dimensions of Sunnylands was the presence of philanthropists not yet funding journalism. These colleagues were enthusiastic about the mission but made clear that our field needs to do a much better job making its case for support. Funding for American journalism is still a very small subset of larger beneficiaries, such as education, healthcare, and the arts. That is both the challenge we face and the dynamic we seek to change.

The overarching takeaway from Sunnylands is extraordinarily positive. While there’s a great deal of work to do, there’s a great and growing movement to do so. ■



Dear Sunnylands, Make More Room for BIPOC, LGBTQ, and Rural Media Leaders at the Table

BY TRACIE POWELL

For years, many communities have been clamoring — begging — for local news media to provide them with highly relevant news and information that reflects themselves and their interests. When that didn’t happen, those communities began building their own hyperlocal

news and information infrastructure.

The recent “The Roadmap for Local News” report urges major donors to support nonprofit startups and other entities producing “civic information,” which the authors describe as information that helps people improve where they live.

There were a few BIPOC people included in the gathering — at Sunnylands, the former Annenberg estate in Rancho Mirage, California — that produced the report, and some BIPOC news outlet founders were included in the report itself. The problem is, they are the same people who already receive funding. Those included also tend to be from similar privileged backgrounds —



For meaningful systemic change, journalists like April Ross, founder of BEE-TV in Southwest Georgia, must be included in conversations about local news

highly educated, middle class, etc. There are others who deserve a seat at that table as well: Historically Black College and University graduates, those with GEDs, folks from rural communities — people the industry might not recognize as professional journalists but who nevertheless are delivering exactly the kind of “civic information” called for in the Sunnylands roadmap.

It’s not enough to have Black and Brown people at the table. We also need to have a diversity of lived experiences and thought. This is the same mistake the industry as a whole continues to make and why we continue to see declines in public trust.

Imagine how much more valuable and exciting the Sunnylands report would have been if voices like Elizabeth Galarza had been included. Elizabeth, a high school dropout with a GED who understood instinctively that her community deserved better regarding quality, credible, and timely news and information, founded Pasa la Voz Savannah.

Pasa la Voz is one of several community newsrooms supported by The Pivot Fund, which I founded and direct. The Pivot Fund identifies, funds, and connects

community news outlets to wrap-around services, such as product development and recruiting and hiring people with the right skills to help them become more sustainable. After a gunman killed 19 fourth graders and two teachers at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, Pasa la Voz Savannah led coverage about a rumored shooting at a predominantly Hispanic school in coastal Georgia. Pasa la Voz reported the story in real-time and in Spanish, which was critical for panicked parents whose primary language is Spanish. The shooting turned out to be a hoax, but Pasa la Voz served those worried parents with critical news and information that was timely and accessible when other news outlets didn’t.

Imagine how much more valuable and exciting the Sunnylands report would have been if voices like April Ross had been included. Ross, a journalist and HBCU graduate, started BEE-TV by posting news and information on her Facebook page. She connects rural residents in racially divided Southwest Georgia to critical news and information about Covid-19 and other pressing issues and to each other via a TV station she now owns that reaches 600,000 households on the Spectrum TV Network.

“The Roadmap for Local News” is a conversation starter. The authors say they want other people to join the discussion. For meaningful and real systemic change, journalists like Galarza and Ross must be brought into the conversation. These are the people on the frontline who provide their communities with life-and-death information.

Pasa la Voz and BEE-TV are the kinds of civic newsrooms donors and journalism practitioners gathered at Sunnylands need to discuss. They could have added to the conversation in myriad ways to include what “civic news” means to their communities, their impacts, and needs beyond just capital.

I have been engaged in this work for more than a decade. I wrote about it in a white paper called “The Rise of New Jacks: How They Got Here, Where They Are, And Where They Are Likely To Go Next” for the Gates Foundation in 2018, in which I wrote about MLK50, FlintB, and others. I wrote another paper in 2019 establishing the Racial Equity in Journalism Fund that pointed out that early philanthropic support of journalism was leaving out BIPOC community news outlets. A third paper, titled “Architects of Necessity: Assessing Philanthropic Support for BIPOC News Outlets” based on research I conducted while at Harvard’s Shorenstein Center, looked at the money that had started flowing to these community newsrooms and the impact those dollars are having. That paper will be published this spring by the International Symposium on Online Journalism. I am heartened that people are still grappling with how to best serve the public with critical news and information.

In a country that will be majority people of color by 2044, let’s make sure leaders of media serving BIPOC and LGBTQ communities, especially in rural and other marginalized areas, are seen by journalism philanthropy and always at the table when talking about civic information. Donors need to hear directly from them. ■

PETER BIELLO/GPE



Dear Sunnylands:

Let’s Widen the

Roadmap — and

Mark an Achievable

Destination for

Local News

BY KEN DOCTOR

Beware of road metaphors.

In the twisty-turny devolution of the local press since The Great Recession, we’ve been driven down pathways, ramps, routes, shortcuts, and, unfortunately, many dead-ends.

Which brings us to the metaphor

of the moment: “The Roadmap for Local News.”

The newest would-be mapping of “what’s wrong with local news” was presented to leaders of major foundation funders, including MacArthur, Ford, Knight, Emerson Collective, and Democracy Fund. The group met outside Palm Springs in Rancho Mirage, at the old Annenberg Estate, Sunnylands, the last weekend in January. Jim Friedlich, chief executive officer of The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, offered a great summary of it for Nieman Reports.

Sunnylands must have been a great oxymoronically

named placed to address the ever-dimming issue that has consumed more than a decade: the widening erosion of local news that has presented as a tableau of news deserts and ghost newspapers, their mastheads still intact, but filled with non-local content. It is wonderful to see serious funders acknowledge this “local news emergency,” though we must ask whether there should be a statute of limitations on that phrase given it’s lasted so long — the last newspaper reports on year-over-year growth go back to 2008.

Call it what we will, alarm is warranted. Finding directions on the landscape that exists today is a top priority for the many discussions unfurling in the months ahead.

That’s why we need to assess this particular roadmap.

Overall, it’s well-intentioned with lots of fine sights along the way, callouts to numerous innovators, and some good ideas for much-needed new development. Rationalization of tech stacks? Check.

Better networking of mission-driven regional news sites? Check.

Building diversity and real inclusivity into the very fabric of local news, in content and in staffing? Check.

Shared services that work? Check.

Really engage with all our populations? Check.

Unfortunately, though, the manifesto misses the mark in two essential functions of any journalistic cartography. First, it omits so many places on the map of local news, places that may be inconvenient reminders that the world — today’s or the world as we would like to envision it — is quite diverse and nuanced. Secondly, it fails to offer what any roadmap requires: a destination that is real, achievable, and satisfying.

Most strikingly to many who have read it, the report seems to strain for detours around two words that should drive this discussion — local news. And it elevates the term “civic information,” a new world populated by “practitioners, stabilizers, champions, networks and communities of practice,” over the words journalism and journalists.

We can all agree that civic information is good, and community betterment, words the roadmap doesn’t include, would be even better. We can all agree that digital media uniquely can drive far better actionable localized civic information than was ever before possible, but that leads us to a first equation:

Civic information ≠ local news

Local news, created, vetted, and presented smartly by skilled editors, reporters, and the product people now so essential to our models, leads the way. It creates large, caring audiences — who can then benefit from civic information as never before.

In the authors’ distaste for the financially driven owners who are sucking the last dollars out of what they believe to be a dying trade, they paint a world of old and new, with the new in infant form and the old to be discarded as quickly as possible.

One problem here:

Print local news ≠ hedge-fund-gutted dailies

For more than a decade, I’ve covered, analyzed,

and decried the destruction that financially driven companies like Alden and Gannett have done. At the same time, though, I’ve recognized that such financially driven companies make up about half of dailies in the country. Independent, civic-driven dailies, such as the Minneapolis Star-Tribune, The Seattle Times, The Philadelphia Inquirer, and The Charleston (SC) Post and Courier, show the life — and potential digital transformation — of many remaining formerly “print” operations. They are joined by literally hundreds of medium and small dailies, and, let no one forget, substantial weeklies, across the country serving millions of local citizens. A good number of these companies still bear their families’ names, and they speak to the pride of decades of perseverance.

Yet they are unmapped here.

The roadmap makes them — and their place on the real map of the 2020s — invisible. Not to include them means throwing out the still-striving babies with the distasteful bathwater of the financially driven chains.

Then there are the larger start-up, digital-only operations that, too, got left off the roadmap.

LION Publishers and the Institute for Nonprofit News count hundreds of members, most of them striving to create new local news organizations. They are a diverse lot, but too few of them got marked on the roadmap, and some of them have demonstrated the potential to play bigger roles in their communities’ futures.

Then there are the mission-driven organizations that are already replacing flagging dailies in their communities. They include a half-dozen aggressive, growing start-ups that are well on the way to doing that, including The Baltimore Banner, Block Club Chicago, The Colorado Sun, the Daily Memphian, the Long Beach Post, and my own Lookout Local/Lookout Santa Cruz. I’ve written about these peer companies, as we’ve met and shared best practices, and you will soon hear more about our collective plans.

What distinguishes these six — and there are more out there across the country — is their intent to replace the dailies that are failing their communities. That means both taking in sufficient investment to fund newsrooms of sufficient scale — enough skilled, diverse journalists who can create, day after day, go-to products that build sizable and engaged audiences. It also means running these community-centric operations as majority earned-revenue businesses — offering a high enough level of product and service to win membership/subscription, advertising, events, and other income.

“Are we there yet?” we may hear from the backseat.

No, but less than five years old and building through Covid-19 times, all are on track to earn a majority of their revenue from readers and advertisers.

All are mission-driven. Some are 501(c)3s. Others are for-profit public benefit corporations. And that’s another key equation here:

Digital news start-ups ≠ nonprofits, only

In the orthodoxy of some who believe they are leading the nonprofit news revival movement, that above equation is infuriating and thus apparently leads to incomplete mapmaking.

Why? There’s a certain comfort with the seeming purity of the term nonprofit — which is understandable, but simplistic — and a major discomfort with business-building and entrepreneurial zeal that experience has shown is vital to forging new sustainable news operations.

Instead, it suggests a curious group of new world builders: “We recommend that a coalition of media practitioners, pro-democracy advocates, funders, and government leaders join forces to ensure that civic information rapidly becomes a ubiquitous asset in every community in the United States.” Many of us want to keep government leaders at arms’ length from local journalism, and for good reason — we cover those sources of power and hold them accountable. Here, too, the role of publishers, editors, and reporters (or are those the discarded terms for “media practitioners?”) vanishes from the roadmap.

Further, the document is blind to the great journalism long and currently created by for-profit companies. The roadmap’s great embrace of the alternative-to-news term of “civic information” has also come under recent scrutiny as some of the roadmap presenters have launched the “Civic News Company” just days after the Sunnylands conference closed.

This roadmap’s orthodoxy maps an inexplicable religiosity of faith over fact and offers a “news must be free” mantra. That disastrous chant should be (thank you, New York Times) an artifact of 1998, when Silicon Valley tech deked news companies with that creed.

Limiting access by payroll? That’s verboten here. In fact, in 2023, intelligent paywalls are beginning to allow us to get membership/subscription money from those who can and will pay — and increasingly serve those who can’t, or won’t, in other ways.

Orthodoxy should be so contrarian to journalists, who, after all, are taught to question everything. In fact, the very name of this mapping, “The Roadmap to Local News,” speaks to the problem. There is no single roadmap. You may have a roadmap — or a new product/business model — but it is just one roadmap or model, not the true path claim that journalists, by nature, can quickly pick apart.

Which leads to another equation:

Successful, mission-driven news organizations ≠ mandated, free-for-all, no access restrictions operations

The report misrepresents a fundamental reason that print newspapers served much — but not all — of the country so well for so long. It sums up the current downward spiral of many of the dailies over-simplistically: “The public goods being produced by the newspaper business model — civic information that benefited even those who didn’t pay for it like coverage of local government, courts, and schools — were being subsidized by consumer and advertiser demand for coverage of sports and entertainment and utilities.”

Subsidy is a popular word thrown about in explanation and is, in part, true. What it fails to acknowledge is this huge point: Tens of millions of Americans actually paid for something they prized — local news.

Further, the explanation misunderstands advertiser demand then and now. Advertisers wanted news section



GRACE BEAHM/THE POST AND COURIER VIA AP

placement, with relatively significantly less demand for sports or entertainment coverage. Most importantly, today, advertising — anathema to too many in the news start-up trade — is in demand by locally owned small businesses aiming to reach local audiences. Such advertising not only offers an important revenue stream — but is community affirming.

In advocating for paywall-free sites, the roadmap seemed to target itself at philanthropy, and that, in and of itself, seems misguided. Why? Dollars and sense: There isn’t enough willing and able philanthropy to fund all the needed thousands of local news outfits in the United States. (A big point, too, on which I will only spend a sentence here: The local news collapse is seen across all democracies, and most of them do not have the philanthropic tradition or framework we do, necessitating greater-than-philanthropy solutions.)

An important equation:

Digital news start-ups ≠ philanthropically dependent organizations

Philanthropy here should be a great partner — and

has already been, in fits and starts. What’s needed is the new alignment of philanthropy with sensible, market-driven business building.

Philanthropy can be fundamental to success — but as early, substantial, game-changing, scale-building investment, and likely as a good supplement over time.

In the end, in the speculative business of new mapmaking, words matter. Ecosystem, a word much prized in this roadmap, is a great goal. It would be wonderful to have such “an interconnected system” that works well for our local democracies. But we don’t. It’s broken, disconnected. Creating a new one won’t be done on paper, or at conferences, but community by community by those investing in and invested in the long-standing bedrock values of local journalism.

Most emphatically, as we face faster-declining local news and the still-rising forces of modern know-nothingism, this is not a time for orthodoxy. It’s a time for an inclusive road-mapping that drives our communities forward. ■

The Post and Courier staff cheers after the Pulitzer prize announcement, April 2015. Independent, civic-driven dailies, like The Post and Courier, are one model of how a local news organization can thrive

WHY PUBLIC RADIO COULD BE A KEY PART OF SAVING LOCAL NEWS



A recent study finds that shoring up NPR member stations with more philanthropic funding could increase community reporting capacity

BY MARIGO FARR

It's a familiar statistic: Approximately 2,500 local news outlets in the United States have closed in the past 20 years — a trend that has continued throughout the pandemic. But, in some of these “news deserts,” the places where papers have been hollowed out or shut down, the heartbeat of local news is holding on in a form that's stood the test of time — local public radio. It's cheaper. It's familiar. And it has the support of a national network.

Yet, by and large, it hasn't been at the forefront of the conversation about saving local news. And that's what Thomas E. Patterson, Bradlee Professor of Government and the Press at the Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, hopes to change. He spearheaded a study, released in January, titled “News Crisis: Can Local Public Radio Help Fill the News Gap Created by the Decline of Local Newspapers?” that involved a survey of 215 National Public Radio member stations across the country. (There are roughly 1,000 member stations in total.)

The study found that most stations are well-positioned to be leading providers of local news in their communities — especially with additional funding to increase their local reporting capacity. And, with an increased digital news presence and a focus on reporting what really matters to communities, some could become the go-to, trusted source of news in “hard news” areas.

The next step is getting philanthropists to understand their critical role. Patterson talked with Nieman Reports about what that would take and articulated a vision for a healthy local news future — one that makes the absence of the newspaper on our doorsteps a little less stark. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

What's at stake in communities without viable local news? And how could local public radio be an antidote?

What we've seen over the last couple of decades is a really sharp decline in local newspapers. Some have closed their doors, others have been hollowed out. And that's created a crisis at the local level in terms of the information that's available about the community. What we do know is that that information is vital to the civic health of the community. When it goes away, the studies show that voter turnout in local elections declines, [there's] less accountability for local officials [and] more polarization.

Most often [the conversation has] been about: How do we bolster our newspapers? Interestingly, local public radio has not been a large part of that conversation. And what our study was designed to do was to see whether they should be part of that conversation and what would

THOMAS E. PATTERSON

it take for local public radio to be a larger player, in terms of meeting communities information needs.

Why has radio been able to survive in some places when newspapers haven't?

One thing is, it's less expensive. It costs a lot more to do a newspaper and television than it does radio. And there's a really wonderful network, this local public radio network, and it derives a lot of its programming nationally from NPR.

All media have lost trust, but local public radio less so than every other medium. So, it is kind of our most trusted source at the moment. It's not like a digital start-up or you're beginning from nothing and trying to build something. Local public radio has a relatively trusted brand in the community. It's a known commodity.

What are local public radio's current limitations and what needs to happen to make it a robust local news source?

About 60 percent of [local public radio stations] have a news staff of 10 people or less. There's not much muscle on the reporting side. Actually, if you look at the content of local public radio, it's not all that local. Mostly, it's national news or national talk coming from the central providers. So, the fundamental challenge of local public radio is to beef up these news staffs to the point where they can be substantial conveyors of local news. Currently, more than half [of the stations studied] are not well positioned [to do so].

If you think about a community's information needs, you've got to be able to really cover that community in a pretty substantial way for you to become a place that people want to go to. If you have a very small staff, each new addition adds a lot to your reporting capacity. If we can boost the budgets of these local stations, the great share of that would and could go to local reporting.

Who should the funding be allocated to?

To me, the priority would be these communities that are being underserved currently in terms of their local information, [where] basically the newspapers dried up or [are] drying up, and there really aren't good substitutes.

Now in some cases ... there are very tiny stations in an area that doesn't have much population, then you end up with the question, is that where you're going to invest your money? [Or] are you going to go into somewhat larger communities where there's equal need and basically the money goes further?

They're not all equally well positioned to be strong providers of local news. Some of them have an ownership structure that kind of limits their possibilities or that kind of limits their creativity.

Your report says that “local stations cannot meet a community's information needs — or expand their audience — without taking the community's interests and values more fully into account.” What are some of those interests?

I think weather is a prime example. That happens to



Thomas E. Patterson, a Harvard Kennedy School professor, argues public radio could play a critical role in strengthening local news

be the most sought-after single news item. [In] agricultural areas ... you live and die by the weather. And then you get into a lot of communities that are very diverse. And you want your news to reflect the diversity of the community. To get local public radio to think more locally ... [is an] important part of their being able to serve their communities better.

What needs to happen to mobilize funding for local public radio?

You look at the top 10 [corporations in the U.S. today] and who are they? It's Meta and Google and Amazon ... and many of them actually are turning out to be extraordinarily good philanthropists. But local public radio has not been high on the list. One of the challenges is to get them to understand how important local news is to the civic health of our communities. And if that should happen, I think it's where the new money that's needed will largely come from.

If you could wave your wand, what would local radio look and feel like in 10 years?

I don't think we'll ever go back to the place where there was one news organization that had nearly the whole of the community paying attention to it. I think to serve local information today, we need kind of [an] all-hands-on-deck model where local public radio is serving part of that community [and] maybe digital startups [or] what's left of the newspaper is providing some of the needs, and then you think about where local public radio could be in that mix. Maybe even in some communities [it's] the most important outlet in terms of the quantity and quality of its news — not only on the on the radio side but also on the digital side so that when you want to find out what's happening in the schools or what the local sports teams are doing, what the local government is doing, your go-to “.com” becomes your local public radio station. They're not there yet, but [if] we give them more resources, they could get there in many communities. ■

FORCED TO FLEE:

→ HOW **EXILED** JOURNALISTS
HOLD THE POWERFUL TO ACCOUNT

As press freedoms around the globe erode,
journalists are building networks outside
their home countries to continue reporting

BY CELESTE KATZ MARSTON



PREVIOUS SPREAD: Roman Anin left Russia in May 2021 and his team at IStories eventually followed. They're now based in Prague, where Czech authorities have given special consideration to exiled journalists from Russia

WHEN GLORIA CHAN TALKS about the work of Green Bean Media, the Hong Kong-focused exile news site she helped found last year in the United Kingdom, she is crisply matter of fact.

“We are not doing something that special. ... We just want to produce [the kind of] programs that we [did] in the past,” says Chan, who teamed up with other members of the diaspora to launch Green Bean against the backdrop of China’s suppression of the free Hong Kong press, including “national security” legislation to stifle dissent.

With stories about state censorship of books and films, immigration, and culture, “We are not really doing something ‘wow’ ... [but] no one in Hong Kong can do it,” Chan adds “This is a problem.”

The lack of independent newsrooms unfettered by censorship, harassment, and death threats is a big problem — and it’s one that’s spread around the world. Since 1993, more than 900 journalists have been murdered, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists — the vast majority of those with complete impunity for the killers. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) cited a record 28 countries as having “very bad” press freedom violations in 2022, with 42 classified as “difficult,” 62 as “problematic,” and just eight as “good.”

Under these conditions, reporters leave home out of fear for their lives or those of their families and friends. Some escape after imprisonment, torture, or sham trials. Threats come from all sides — totalitarian governments, brutal military regimes, targeted violence from gangs, and thuggish oligarchs.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: LENKA GRABICOVA



Last year, Gloria Chan helped found Green Bean Media, the Hong Kong-focused exile news site based in the United Kingdom

CHUEN SUNG MA

Confronted with the obstacles of refugee life, some regretfully lay down their cameras and close their laptops. “We need to be able to provide a place for journalists where they can resume their journalistic activities. [Being] abroad is one thing, but being abroad and not continuing journalism is a problem for all of them,” says RSF Editor-in-Chief Pauline Adès-Mével. “We always try to support as long as possible journalism in the country, and it’s not for us the best solution, ever, to have all these people leave. [But] sometimes, there is no choice.”

There have been growing reasons for the necessity of exile journalism. As the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance noted in a study

of the global state of democracy in 2022, “Over the past six years, the number of countries moving toward authoritarianism is more than double the number moving toward democracy.” Repression was significantly on the rise in non-democracies, and even in places where democracy was the prevailing system, there had been stagnation or erosion — all of this fueled in part by forces from war to pandemic to economic uncertainty. Dictators and criminal enterprises see a free press as an existential threat, and seek to discredit, diminish, or destroy its work — and reporters themselves.

Some reporters, like Zahra Joya, find ways to soldier on from afar: A child when the Taliban took over her

After obtaining asylum in France, Biniam Simon, a former state TV presenter in Eritrea, founded Radio Erena in Paris in 2009

native Afghanistan, Joya founded Rukhshana Media in 2020 to highlight the plight of Afghan women. She fled the country in August 2021, and now lives and works in the United Kingdom.

“We only have this way to speak about what [is] happening [to] our people,” says Joya, one of Time’s 2022 Women of the Year. Rukhshana Media received the 2022 Louis M. Lyons Award for Conscience and Integrity in Journalism, conferred by the Nieman class of 2022 to honor the news outlet for its “unwavering commitment to giving prominence to a silenced and terrorized community, the women of Afghanistan who are living under Taliban control.” “We lost everything,” she says. “We lost our family, our home, [even] our country. ... [The] only thing that we have is to speak about the Taliban’s violence and the other injustice that is going on in our society.”

Getting away from the immediate danger may boost safety, but it can make the reporting itself exponentially harder. Some report or edit from outside the country with correspondents operating clandestinely from within. Newer technologies like secure messaging apps help greatly, as does access to leaked documents, but verification becomes substantially harder across borders. Hostile governments obfuscate and deliberately feed exile outlets false information to tank their credibility.

Maziar Bahari, founder of exile outlet IranWire, says the interference takes insidious forms, with officials even posing as agonized relatives of detainees and murder victims and pleading with the media to drop stories. “This government [is] composed of revolutionaries, and as a result, they know how to undermine the system,” says Bahari, who was imprisoned while covering Iran for Newsweek. “It’s a very, very sophisticated, conniving government.”

Many outlets are blocked from view in their target countries and rely on mirror sites, full copies of a website located at an alternative URL, to protect access to their reporting. That bandwidth costs money. Funding for mirrors — and defending websites against hacking — can be a challenge. Most startups fail, and exile media must also factor in the toxicity of being unable to advertise in the target country and serving an audience that can’t afford to subscribe or give — or fear to do so. On top of all that: How do you even pay staff when the government uses spyware — and actual spies — to track you?

Meanwhile, journalists in exile struggle with personal challenges from the bureaucratic to the emotional: getting asylum or work visas; finding housing, to say nothing of a new job; language barriers; and lingering trauma. The JX Fund, a collaboration that includes RSF, was created to help exiled reporters with these hurdles, including via financial aid, workspace, equipment, and legal guidance.

And exile does not always promise safety.

In May 2021, Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko ordered a fighter jet to intercept a Ryanair civilian plane carrying opposition journalist Roman Protasevich from its Athens-Vilnius route. Once the plane landed, Protasevich was arrested and accused of inciting unrest. Washington Post writer and Saudi exile Jamal Khashoggi was brutally murdered in Turkey in 2018. Even after death, reporters can remain targets: Iranian reporter Reza Haghighatnejad died of cancer in Berlin last year after an exile career with



Radio Free Europe. When his body was repatriated for burial, it was stolen by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, the outlet reported.

As exiled journalists grapple with reporting from far away, they’re also questioning the very nature of journalism: Katya Martynova, an exile editor from Moscow now working from Germany for DOXA, a youth-focused digital outlet that’s seen considerable growth since its founding in 2017, says that when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, “it [became] clear that being a journalist, especially in exile, is also to be an activist ... If you are fighting [against] Putin’s propaganda ... that’s also a political act.”

Under these circumstances, journalists around the globe are continuing their work against the greatest odds. But as The Washington Post’s Jason Rezaian, who spent 544 days imprisoned in Iran, points out, they do have a unique edge. “What they do have is a connective tissue to things that are happening back in Iran or Afghanistan or whatever country that they come from that we don’t have — [that] we can’t replicate,” he says. “Without people like that, [we] wouldn’t have a real good understanding of any of the conflict zones or trouble spots around the world that matter so much.”

Here’s a look at just a few more of the exiled journalists and organizations around the world that are continuing to report on their home countries.

SARA FARID

→ AFRICA RADIO TAMAZUJ

When the media in a free country covers a politician making a gaffe or falling ill, it’s fodder for highlight reels. But when cameras caught South Sudan President Salva Kiir apparently wetting his pants at a ceremony in late 2022, six state media employees were arrested.

Radio Tamazuj, an exile outlet covering South Sudan with employees scattered across Africa, was first to name the arrested journalists in its coverage of the incident, according to the station. It’s easy to understand why other outlets may have been more cautious about wading into the controversy: As pro-democracy nonprofit Freedom House has noted, while South Sudan’s constitution provides for press freedom, in practice, “The government censors, harasses, and arrests journalists, especially those who criticize it or report on corruption or sanctions.” RSF places South Sudan at 128 of 180 in its World Press Freedom Index.

Tamazuj, which means “blend” in Arabic, launched in 2011 and initially operated out of the South Sudanese capital, Juba. In 2015, the national security service shuttered the office, began interrogating the staff, and started to deport foreign national colleagues. “It was a way to silence us,” says the editor-in-chief, who does not disclose his identity

or location publicly due to security concerns. “The government did not want us to report on human rights violations, corruption, conflict, [and] killings of innocent civilians.”

The staff left incrementally so as not to attract attention — and made a deliberate decision not to regroup in a single place to continue their work. Tamazuj now has 10 editors, plus clandestine stringers in South Sudan.

Radio is a vital way to reach people, the editor says: “[The] illiteracy rate in South Sudan is high,” and internet access is limited to big cities. “Radio, for the vulnerable people who live in the rural areas, is the only source of information.”

Radio Tamazuj broadcasts in English, Arabic, and South Sudan’s Juba Arabic dialect and last year claimed nearly 800,000 shortwave listeners and about 10 million page views. It also has more than 194,000 followers on Facebook and more than 42,000 on Twitter. The authorities have in the past blocked access to the Tamazuj site for “hostile” reporting, but broadcasts continued uninterrupted on shortwave radio.

Editorially, “we tend to look more for accountability stories,” such as a 2022 Tamazuj investigation showing how infighting had thwarted a \$55 million USAID school-building project. It has also reported on teacher shortages, press repression — including self-censorship — and the slayings of dozens of church leaders. When other South Sudanese outlets think a story’s too hot to handle, they’ll send it to Tamazuj. People living in the country typically are not persecuted for listening to Tamazuj, but outlets run a risk if they take up Tamazuj’s standing offer to republish its work, he says.

The editor-in-chief operates out of a new home base in Africa. He tells few people what he does or why he is there. Radio Tamazuj, supported by international donors, doesn’t use bylines. Exile life has its psychological costs, he says, but it’s a duty: “Building a nation, you need an independent media that can inform people, can create a platform for citizens to participate in public discourse.”

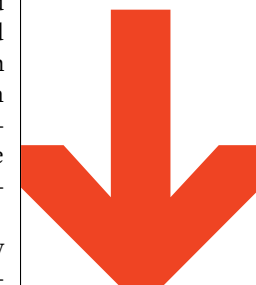
RADIO ERENA

Biniam Simon was working for state TV in Eritrea when he saw his chance for a second life.

He was in Japan for a video training seminar. At home, “I was in the front line for being targeted” in a country notorious for locking up reporters, he recalls. Any error, even a minor technical goof, could “be looked at like a political statement.” RSF ranks Eritrea’s press freedom at 179 of 180 — second only to North Korea. “The media are subject to the whim of President Issayas Afeworki, a dictator responsible for crimes against humanity,” the group says. “Journalists have either fled the country or are in prison.”

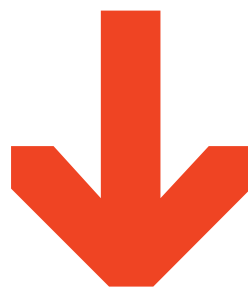
In a plotline right out of a suspense movie, Simon escaped from the Tokyo airport and whatever fate awaited him in Eritrea, obtaining asylum in France. In 2009, Simon — formerly a well-known TV presenter — founded Radio Erena, or “Our Eritrea,” in Paris.

Deutsche Welle Akademie has estimated Erena’s audience at more than 500,000 — remarkable for a small exile station that covers a nation of less than four



“Building a nation, you need an independent media that can inform people, can create a platform for citizens to participate in public discourse”

Editor-in-Chief, Radio Tamazuj



“[We’re]
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decide what
they want”
Biniam Simon,
Radio Erena

million. It broadcasts in Arabic and Tigrinya, and maintains a website with an English-language version. Erena currently broadcasts daily by shortwave and by Nilesat satellite. It also has a mobile app and a YouTube channel where its 56,000 followers can watch shows on news, culture, sports, music — even a sitcom.

Erena now has about 15 staffers spread out in countries like Uganda, Kenya, and Sudan, though the number fluctuates. At the beginning, he struggled to recruit fellow refugees. “As soon as you left the country, the threat to the family is the first thing that comes to your mind,” he explains. As for listenership, “At the beginning it was really hard, because people went to prison if they are found listening to the radio,” he says. “[But Erena] has become a household name. Everybody turns it on, so they cannot imprison the whole country.”

Erena has built its news operation by relying on sources and a network of informants who do not know each other to verify information. It multitasks with the realities of Eritrea in mind — including the lack of internet access. By some measures, its miniscule internet usage has actually decreased in recent years. “Shortwave is more effective, because it’s portable and people have the habit — especially in rural areas, people carry [a] small radio, and it works with batteries,” he says. In the cities and military posts, there’s more satellite access.

It’s easy for Simon to see the impact of his work on a country where information is so scarce. After Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi began hiring west Africans as mercenaries, Simon says, Black people in the country came under suspicion and threat: “People even started calling us from Eritrea to tell us, ‘I have a son. I have a daughter named this and this. Could you confirm if they’re okay?’” And, his outlet covered the Lampedusa tragedy, during which more than 360 Eritreans fleeing the dictatorship drowned in the Mediterranean Sea after their boat caught fire. “We were the first to announce the victims’ names,” Simon recalls.

The Eritrean government is listening. “Everything we say here is transcribed by hand every day,” he says. How does he know? An ex-Ministry of Information worker is now one of his news editors.

The “government still has hundreds of thousands of followers. And these are the people I want to listen to me,” says Simon. “People should know that even speaking freely, even expressing your ideas, is like your birthright. ... [We’re] trying to explain what’s happening in the country, [and] what’s going on wrong, what’s going on right. You put everything there, and then people can decide what they want.”

→ ASIA THE IRRAWADDY

It’s been a turbulent road for Aung Zaw — and a long one. 2023 marks 30 years since he started covering his native Myanmar (which is also known as Burma) via The Irrawaddy, a magazine named for the nation’s greatest river. “I look back and I [say], ‘Wow. We survived,’” he says. “You know, we started with a very humble, humble beginning.”

Zaw started the outlet with “maybe a few thousand baht” in Bangkok, Thailand, after being imprisoned and tortured in Myanmar for pro-democracy activities. Irrawaddy, which provides news in both English and Burmese, was first produced at a local copy shop and snail-mailed. The digital English version launched in 2000, and the Burmese version launched the next year.

The survival of The Irrawaddy is directly linked to the survival of its staff inside and outside Myanmar. RSF ranks the country at 176 of 180 in press freedom and says the head of the junta “openly promotes a policy of terror towards journalists” who don’t parrot the official line and regularly use imprisonment and torture to maintain control of the narrative. The Irrawaddy’s staff has moved from Zoom staff meetings to Signal calls out of security concerns. Staffers get training on digital safety — carrying a “clean” personal phone separate from a “dirty” work phone in case of detainment; constantly changing sim cards to avoid tracking; exercising caution about not only sources, but also neighbors and surroundings, even in exile.

When the country opened up (somewhat) in 2012, some staffers stayed in Thailand and others returned to Myanmar. “We went back to Burma and slowly started testing [a] one foot in, one foot out strategy,” says Zaw, who won the 2014 CPJ International Press Freedom Award. The relative freedom didn’t last: February 2021 brought a military coup — and plunged the nation back into profoundly hostile territory for journalists. Zaw had to leave again.

Today, The Irrawaddy pursues accountability reporting — including ongoing “junta crony” corruption coverage — with funding from international philanthropy and NGOs. The magazine has detailed how former generals, relatives, and pals of junta leader Min Aung Hlaing have been appointed to top ministerial roles, and how the junta “permitted the US-sanctioned Htoo Group, owned by a notorious arms dealer, to import over US\$5.4 million worth of palm oil per month.”

There have been ups and downs. Donor fatigue has been an issue. Consultants might eye a paywall to generate cash, but “you want your country to be free, to [be] democratic ... you have a mission,” he says.

Working with a hybrid exile/in-country staff has other complexities, including emergency relocations and protection of non-editorial staff, like drivers and accountants who can be targeted because they know where other staffers live. To pay people, The Irrawaddy has turned to hundi, a centuries-old money transfer system that relies on trusted agents in multiple countries and leaves a minimal paper trail. “You cannot use the bank, [because the] regime follows the money,” Zaw says. “They [want] to know who are the donors, who are the funders, who are the investors. They are suspicious of everything foreign. And you can be accused of high treason if you receive money from abroad.”

Zaw says, along the Thai-Myanmar border, “We have more freedom [to talk to] rebels and insurgents, or [business] people.” While operating fully inside Burma isn’t currently possible, Zaw says he just couldn’t cover the country the same way from Europe or the U.S.



Removed, but not too far, The Irrawaddy still has measures of both access and freedom.

“In spite of odds and challenges, we stick around because this is the best place to operate,” he adds. “You can get the real story from here.”

AMU TV

When Amu TV launched as a new exile outlet covering Afghanistan in August 2022, staff took their best guesses as to how many Twitter followers they might hope to rack up in a day.

“One of the colleagues said, ‘If we have 1,000, that would be a great achievement.’ I said yes — but to myself, I was saying, ‘Even if we get 500, that would be good,’” recalls Samiullah Mahdi, co-founder and editor-in-chief. “The next day, in 24 hours, we had over 10,000 followers. ... I think [it’s] because of the need and the thirst among people for credible and reliable news.”

Before the fall of Kabul in 2021, Mahdi was Afghanistan bureau chief of Radio Azadi, an arm of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. He got out a day before the Taliban took the city. A few weeks later, in Istanbul, he met Lotfullah Najafizada, who was head of Tolonews, one of the most popular journalism operations in Afghanistan. They put their heads together about ways

to preserve the free-media progress their country had made and keep covering the resurgence of the Taliban and threats to women, as well as business, culture, and sports. The Taliban taking over the country in August of 2021, “radically changed the media landscape. In the space of three months, 43% of Afghan media outlets disappeared,” says RSF, which ranks Afghanistan at 156 of 180 in its World Press Freedom Index. “Many subjects are still difficult for the media to cover in Afghanistan. Themes related to religion, the status of women and human rights in general are off limits.”

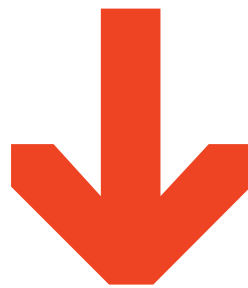
Amu TV launched with a multi-phase plan: Get established first with digital, build a studio in the U.S., and eventually move to satellite. (“TV is the number one medium in Afghanistan to access the people around the country,” says Mahdi.) Today, Mahdi works from Amu headquarters near Washington, D.C.; Najafizada is in Toronto. The total staff of about 40 is split 50-50 inside and outside Afghanistan and presents the news in English, Farsi, and Pashto.

About 75 percent of Amu’s audience is inside Afghanistan. It has pulled in more than 60,000 Twitter followers, 119,000 on Facebook, and around 15,000 on YouTube. It relies heavily on social media to develop reach.

Mahdi says “having access to real information, real people inside the country” through correspondents and

Samiullah Mahdi, editor-in-chief of the Afghan exile outlet Amu TV, works out of Amu’s headquarters in Sterling, Virginia. Amu’s staff is split 50-50 inside and outside of Afghanistan

MICHAEL ROBINSON CHAVEZ



“We know
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Samiulla Mahdi,
Amu TV

informants is key. So is pairing that with an external team of editors “who are not influenced [by] the Taliban threatening their lives.” It’s especially evident on sensitive stories like Amu’s coverage of rape and civilian killings. Last year, Amu spoke to local Taliban officials and residents of Panjshir Province who confirmed details of a violent case in which a woman and her four daughters — the girls were ages 10 to 18 — were beaten and raped by Taliban members. And Amu has set up a private internet portal where in-country correspondents can share information with Western-based editors. While Amu encourages reporters to remember “no story deserves [losing] your life,” the hybrid model allows the outlet to pursue stories “local media are not able to tackle anymore,” he says.

Amu TV, largely funded by NGOs, is also betting on some of the boldface names it’s recruited. Among these are News Manager Anisa Shaheed, an award-winning human rights reporter whom Mahdi calls a role model for the next generation of journalists, especially for young women trying to break into the business. There’s also Karim Amini, who appeared on Afghan screens for a decade as a field reporter and host, and Mujeeb Arez (and his 490,000 Instagram followers), a well-known television host.

Mahdi often emphasizes Amu has modest means compared to established foreign outlets. But “we know our country, [and] we know and feel the suffering,” he says. “That [gives] us a kind of access that international media would find it very difficult to have.”

→ LATIN AMERICA

ONDA LOCAL

Cristopher Mendoza has worked as a journalist with Onda Local since 2007 to cover Nicaragua, a nation with a long, violent history of press repression — and courageous independent journalists. “My specialty is the municipalities, the smaller areas and cities, outside the capital,” he says. While power may have long been centered in Managua, the capital doesn’t represent the whole nation, so “it’s important to tell the stories of deep Nicaragua, of the other parts of the country.”

Regime authorities interrogated Mendoza, accusing him of money laundering and receiving money “in an inappropriate manner” on behalf of Nicaraguan investigative reporter Carlos Fernando Chamorro, founder of Confidencial and a scion of one of the country’s most notable political families. “They asked me questions about the independent journalists, who [they] were and why were they criticizing the Ortega-Murillo regime. And I explained that independent journalism questions power, that this is our job and our right, and it’s enshrined in the constitution,” Mendoza says.

His lawyer advised him to leave. Mendoza arrived in Costa Rica in September 2021 and applied for asylum, as have scores of other Nicaraguan journalists fearful for their lives. In Daniel Ortega’s Nicaragua, uncensored journalism is a crime, and the penalties for attempting it

are brutally doled out by government and military raids, beatings, arrests, and harassment. RSF ranks Nicaragua at 160 of 180 in terms of press freedom, saying that “the few media outlets that still operate within the country, such as Radio Corporación or the Acción 10 newscast, avoid confronting the government for fear of reprisals.”

Onda Local, which launched in 2000 as a project of the Centro de Investigaciones de la Comunicación under journalists Chamorro and Patricia Orozco, has struggled to keep informing Nicaraguans in the face of censorship — including getting suspended three times: “The ambition of the regime is to control everything that’s said,” Mendoza says. “But so far we have been able, through social media, through YouTube, through websites, to continue to supply reporting that can be seen inside Nicaragua.”

After being kicked off of live radio multiple times, Mendoza says, Onda Local (in English, “Local Wave”) has turned its focus to podcasting. Recent episodes have looked at the regime’s control over the nation’s audiovisual archive, human rights violations and torture under President Daniel Ortega, who was elected in 2006, and oppression of municipal autonomy. Recently, the outlet has also focused on migration and public safety, reporting on the families sundered by outmigration and the many perils of the journey. “Sometimes we can’t do everything on broadband, so we also do try to be creative [by] using WhatsApp distribution lists or bulletins distributed over email or other things like that,” he says.

Over decades, Onda Local built up sources to draw on — many of whom are also now in exile themselves, Mendoza says. The outlet also relies on help from human rights groups to document the situation in-country. To protect sources, it can modify voices or obscure faces in broadcasts.

Grants help fill the financial gaps left by limited commercial opportunities for Nicaraguan media. Additionally, Onda Local’s website promotes its offer of “production, recording and editing services for radio and video formats.” Compounding the money issue, it’s “practically impossible in Nicaragua to get contributions from inside, because the government enacted what they call a law of foreign agents. [Any] communications media or institution has to report any donations that it receives,” Mendoza explains. “People feel even inside the country that if they were to contribute, that they would be branded as traitors or foreign agents.”

To bring Nicaraguan journalists together wherever they are, Mendoza helped found the group Independent Journalists and Communicators of Nicaragua (in Spanish, PCIN) in 2018. “We were very badly hurt [because] of the repression [and] the murder of Angel Gahona,” a journalist gunned down while filming an anti-Ortega protest. “We needed to do something.” Five years later, there are more than 200 members of the group, which documents attacks on the press and offers safety training and advocacy.

Even if he can someday return to work in Nicaragua, “It’s never going to be easy. [Power] will always attempt to hide information, even if the dictatorship falls, [and] attempt to make difficult this task of independent journalism.”



API GUERRERO

Mexico has been labeled RSF’s deadliest country for journalists three years in a row. More than 150 journalists have been killed there since 2000, when Jonathan Cuevas first went into the news business. A decade later, he and his wife started what is now the Agency of Investigative Journalism (API) as a regional news service in his home state of Guerrero.

API began to collect and investigate denuncios — complaints — from the people of Guerrero in three areas: opacity in the use of government resources, public employees abusing their positions, and links between government officials and organized crime. These investigations went over poorly with both the government and the gangs.

First came harassment through social media, followed by threats. “They put [out] messages saying that we had criminal records as domestic abusers of women,” Cuevas says. “[They] were trying to damage our public reputation so that people would no longer believe what we wrote.”

A friend passed along a warning: Organized crime wanted API to stop looking into the president, or else Cuevas would be accused of mob ties. He was threatened with death and dismemberment. He was followed.

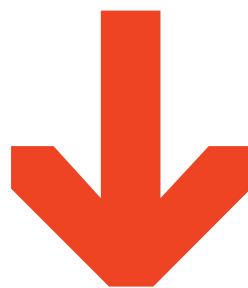
A criminal group menaced him for supposedly working with a rival crew.

When Cuevas reported the threats to the government, they offered relocation under the country’s human rights program. He held out as long as he could before accepting. “As journalists, what we most want to depend on is what we [can] see with our own eyes,” he says.

Now in Mexico City, “I can’t do any field work,” he says. “If I want to go to visit Guerrero, I need to request a permit.” To report from afar — much as in the case of exile outlets that leave their countries entirely — he has colleagues on the ground make photos and videos, asking them to get him phone numbers so he can interview the subjects directly as needed. In other cases, he gives his co-workers lines of questioning to further the reporting in areas he himself cannot enter. To fill in the investigatory gaps created by distance, Cuevas can also turn to online tools, such as the “national platform of transparency,” which gives access to Mexico’s public records.

Exile, even within Mexico, has exacted a financial toll on API Guerrero, Cuevas says. Some of the clients of his news service became targets of threats and pulled back from business dealings with the agency, leaving a hole in the budget. While API retains about 10 collaborators within the state, he says, at least one quit because of delayed payments. He says it’s difficult to pinpoint the full scope

Cristopher Mendoza has worked as a journalist with Onda Local since 2007 to cover Nicaragua, a nation with a long, violent history of press repression



**“In Belarus,
we have no
influence on the
government.
But here in
Europe, the
government and
officials react”**

**Ales Yarashevich,
Belarusian
Investigative
Center**

of API’s audience, but the agency has about 400,000 followers on social media, primarily via a variety of Facebook pages, and currently provides news to approximately 20 written, radio, and digital media outlets — some via agency sales, and some via information-sharing partnerships.

Cuevas says he can’t remain under federal protection indefinitely, and he still gets threats. As a sort of insurance policy should something go wrong, he’s part of the Forbidden Stories SafeBox Network. Journalists under threat share their investigative materials so that if they’re kidnapped, jailed, or killed, other reporters can complete and disseminate their work, proving “killing the reporter won’t kill the story.” After Indian journalist Gauri Lankesh was shot and killed at her Bengaluru home in 2017, more than 100 journalists from 30 outlets banded together to further her work on exposing “troll armies” that systematically weaponized disinformation for political gain. For years, dozens of journalists have worked on a seminal Forbidden Stories case, the Daphne Project, to both continue the anti-corruption work of Maltese investigative reporter Daphne Caruana Galizia — and to investigate who was behind her murder in a car bombing.

Cuevas makes a point of speaking out about anti-press violence. “If you give in and are silenced, then you are forgotten. And then if something happens to you, you’ll die a silent death. At least by raising our voices, we can perhaps obligate the government to take some kind of action,” he says.

→ EASTERN EUROPE

BELARUSIAN INVESTIGATIVE CENTER

Ales Yarashevich of the Belarusian Investigative Center has been working in exile since the summer of 2021, amid the arrest of journalists under Lukashenko’s press crackdown. RSF reports that until Russia invaded Ukraine, Belarus carried the mantle of the most dangerous country in Europe for journalists and was ranked 153 of 180 in press freedom by the organization. “The Belarusian authorities systematically target journalists, who can be arrested, searched, sometimes assaulted and mistreated in prison,” RSF writes. Conditions for working press have worsened since 2020, when Lukashenko was re-elected for a sixth term in a vote denounced as rigged by his opposition at home and in the West, and which spurred widespread protests. Between 2020 and 2023, RSF counts close to 200 Belarusian journalists as having been imprisoned, many remaining in detention.

The center was founded in 2019 as a journalists’ collective, but officially took on the BIC name after leaving Belarus. Yarashevich relocated after authorities raided the studios of Belsat TV, arresting close colleagues of his, and searched his mother’s home. Now, BIC has about 50 workers, including journalists, camera operators, sound and video engineers, bookkeepers, and support staff.

The government last year declared BIC an “extremist” organization, says Yarashevich, who formerly worked for independent news agency BelaPAN, which

has seen a handful of its top leaders sentenced to prison for high treason and tax evasion. Not only can journalists be locked up in penal colonies, but “it’s dangerous for people to be subscribed [to] our Telegram channel or our YouTube channel,” he says. “[If] they spread our information, it means they spread extremist information.”

Yarashevich currently works in Lithuania, although some of his colleagues are in Poland, Georgia, and elsewhere. They accept donations but are aware of the dangers individual supporters may face; its website specifically warns against donating to its work from inside Belarus and offers options to give via cryptocurrency and Patreon. The center has a following of about 60,000 on YouTube, with smaller audiences on Telegram, Instagram, and Twitter.

The center, which also does economic analysis and fact-checking reporting, draws its power not only from its own staff but from the reach of journalistic networks such as the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and Global Investigative Journalism Network.

Collaboration “gives us different possibilities. We can use different databases [and] order profiles for different companies and financial records,” says Yarashevich, who also worked on the Pandora Papers, the biggest investigative reporting project in history. Getting quotes from people inside the country is often a problem, as these sources (rightly) fear persecution, but there’s a rich field of experts to draw on internationally — including Belarusian natives in exile. Yarashevich still has contacts in Belarus and can use their information on background after communicating via secure channels.

While Yarashevich says BIC writes for a Belarusian audience, it’s hard to change things at home under the rule of Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994. Where BIC has seen results, he says, is outside the country.

BIC joined forces with Delfi in Estonia and Latvia-based Re:Baltica to investigate how Belarusian oil exports to Estonia soared in 2021, despite E.U. sanctions and thanks to an oligarch known as “Lukashenko’s energy wallet.” After the stories hit, Estonia’s prime minister announced her nation would suspend the transit of all Belarusian oil products. In the U.K., BIC worked with The Guardian to expose how the son of a Russian billionaire with close ties to Lukashenko was linked to a lavish portfolio of London properties; the son was sanctioned.

“In Belarus, we have no influence on the government,” he says. “But here in Europe, the government and officials react.”

ISTORIES

When Roman Anin started Important Stories, or IStories, in 2020, “we didn’t even consider ourselves as a media outlet,” he says. The original idea was to “publish in-depth investigations and reports every week, and share them with major media outlets both in Russia and abroad,” like Novaya Gazeta, Meduza, and more.

As IStories dug deep, Anin became a target of interrogation and searches. Harassment is commonplace for Russian journalists, with many reports of arrests and



Jonathan Cuevas, co-founder of the Agency of Investigative Journalism, joins the symbolic closing of the attorney general’s office to protest the murder of 15 Mexican journalists, Aug. 2022. Over 150 journalists have been killed in Mexico since Cuevas first went into the news business

questioning for covering anti-government protests. More journalists have been murdered in Russia than anywhere else in Europe over the past 20 years, per RSF, and outlets that question the regime have been forced to shutter or relocate abroad. Anin left Russia in May 2021, and his team eventually followed. They’re now based in Prague, where Czech authorities have given special consideration to exiled journalists from Russia.

But with Russian President Vladimir Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, “Now we are not an investigative media outlet that publishes once a week, [but] a daily media outlet that is covering war on a daily basis,” he says. “We have reporters in Ukraine, we have freelancers in Russia, we have investigators in various countries, so we’re becoming bigger and bigger, and the audience is growing.”

In May of 2022, IStories had 184,000 followers on YouTube; less than a year later, that number had increased to 332,000. Now, “we really think that our mission as Russian journalists is [to] let people in Russia know the truth about the war, [because] people [are] getting information [from the] propaganda” the Kremlin spins to control the narrative while it blocks as many independent news outlets as possible.

Blocked in Russia at the outset of the war, IStories had to get creative. “We asked ourselves, ‘What are the platforms that are still available in Russia?’” The answer was YouTube and Telegram. “So we decided to invest all our energy in these two platforms, and we started making more videos — even though we are not TV reporters,” Anin explains.

It worked: Some of the videos went viral — including

one about the families of slain soldiers from the Siberian region of Buryatia, which was viewed by nearly seven million people. Another spotlighting the business dealings of Putin’s family via leaked documents drew more than 3.5 million views.

How many people are on the IStories team now, exactly? Anin won’t say.

“We are [an] ‘undesirable organization,’” a blacklist label under Russian law that opens up IStories staff to criminal prosecution. “Just admitting the fact that I head IStories, I can be sentenced to [six] years of prison. All my reporters [can] be sentenced to four years,” he says — “and any reader who reposts our stories can be sentenced to four years of prison as well.”

Anin says IStories pays dearly for Google storage to maintain a mirror website “reachable in Russia without VPN,” he says, but the traffic just doesn’t compare to their Telegram and YouTube audiences.

It accepts donations by credit card, Google Pay, crypto, and YouTube sponsorship, but refuses help from inside Russia, “primarily to ensure the safety of the donors themselves,” according to the website.

Anin doesn’t think he can return to a Russia ruled by Putin, and he’s not sure how IStories will evolve next — or even how long it will last.

“Maybe next year, Russia will shut down the internet, and it’ll become impossible to reach the audience in the country. ... We have no idea. [We] think only about tomorrow,” he says. “We do our job while we can. When it becomes impossible, we’ll think about something else.” ■

LUIS BARRON/EYEPix VIA ZUMA PRESS WIRE

**“WE’RE
GOING TO BE
WHERE NO ONE
ELSE IS”**



**In the wake of the
devastation wrought by
Hurricane Maria, journalists
in Puerto Rico are doubling
down on independent
news organizations**

BY LAURA N. PÉREZ SÁNCHEZ

Carlos Torres draws with the aid of his cellphone's
flashlight in San Isidro in Canóvanas after Hurricane
Maria. The category 4 hurricane ravaged the island,
leaving it under complete darkness

LA PERLA DEL SUR, one of the few independent media outlets in Puerto Rico to cover news outside the capital, San Juan, announced in June that it was printing its final edition. After four decades, it was unable to overcome the steady loss of income that had compounded over the last five years, which led to print editions of only 12 pages, far from the 80 pages this local paper averaged in its glory days.

Readers of the weekly La Perla del Sur (The Pearl of the South) in its home base of Ponce, Puerto Rico’s main southern city, and across the region were devastated by the loss of one of the few Puerto Rican newspapers to hold power to account in that area. The outlet was widely known, for example, for following up for years on the unregulated disposal of toxic ash from a coal energy plant in southern landfills, and the community’s protests against this practice. Journalists, too, bemoaned yet another closure, this time of an outlet known for its serious and rigorous journalism that had in recent years garnered industry recognition, including multiple awards.

But just three months after folding, La Perla del Sur announced its return, with new ownership and as a digital-only publication. The same journalists would be in charge of its coverage, but the funding model was new — and quite unusual in Puerto Rico.



JOE RAEDLE/GETTY IMAGES

PREVIOUS SPREAD: ERIKA RODRIGUEZ

La Perla del Sur is the latest in a string of independent media initiatives in Puerto Rico seeking to provide critical information during a time marked by natural, economic, and political disasters. Over the past five years, Puerto Ricans have experienced the catastrophe of Hurricane Maria, an ousted governor, a string of earthquakes that shook the country’s southern coast, a global pandemic and, most recently, catastrophic flooding in the wake of Hurricane Fiona. All this in the midst of a nearly two-decades-long fiscal crisis and a government bankruptcy process that brought austerity and cuts to public services.

Omar Alfonso, a journalist for La Perla del Sur for

30 years and currently its executive editor, is optimistic about the project’s future. A local businessman purchased the rights to the weekly’s name from the family of its founder, the late Juan Noguerras de la Cruz. “There was a mismatch between editorial progress and commercial progress,” Alfonso says. “On the one hand, the paper’s editorial reputation was growing, but, on the other, the company was bleeding money.”

Rather than relying on advertising dollars, La Perla del Sur is working under a hybrid model that includes fixed monthly contributions from local companies and individual sponsors — much like America’s Public Broadcasting Service relies on corporate donations to

deliver programming — and income from special events related to their coverage and other topics of interest for the community. The hope is to have the resources to pay the outlet’s four full-time journalists and 20 freelancers and collaborators while also guaranteeing the outlet’s operation through the end of the year.

“The loss of La Perla del Sur caused an impact in the area, and institutions stood up and said, ‘Let’s do whatever we have to do to bring it back,’” Alfonso says. Since their return, La Perla del Sur reporters have documented the stagnation in the reconstruction process in the southern towns most devastated by the 2020 earthquakes. In Peñuelas, more than 500 houses left unin-

habitable are yet to be demolished, and three years later families are still waiting to rebuild and resume their lives in their home communities.

Not all independent media outlets that have emerged in Puerto Rico in recent years are based on legacy projects or legacy financial models. In the wake of multiple disasters and the fiscal crisis, as well as the decline of television, radio, and text news sources, a range of more specialized — mostly digital and niche — projects have sought to fill the gap.

Journalist and professor Amary Santiago Torres recalls meeting with her friend and colleague Cristina del Mar Quiles two months after Hurricane Maria in 2017,

Thousands took to the streets to call on Ricardo Rosselló, the governor of Puerto Rico, to step down in San Juan, July 2019

when most of the island was still without electricity and struggling to access basic services. Together, they sought to answer the question: What would our ideal media outlet look like?

They knew each other from their years working in legacy media: Santiago Torres worked for 17 years at Primera Hora newspaper, which she left in 2015 after accepting an offer to retire early; Quiles left her job in the same newsroom in 2016. Together they concluded that their dream publication didn't exist in Puerto Rico. So, they decided to launch Todas to cover the multiple crises — as well as proposed solutions — on the island, all through a feminist lens.

“Looking at the panorama, all the layoffs and lacking opportunities, we decided that we wanted to create an opportunity, and we always thought big,” Santiago Torres says, adding that they used other Latin American feminist publications — like LatFem from Argentina and GK from Ecuador — as guides.

In November 2018, a year after that meeting, Todas published its first stories, roughly coinciding with protests across Puerto Rico calling for the government to declare a state of emergency over a wave of violence against women. While experts warned about the increase of gender violence after a disaster like Hurricane Maria,

one of the agency's clients, the reporter assigned has not worked with them on the commercial side of the business. Also, they do not contract with government agencies or public officials.

“It's hard because we're doing one job to support another job,” acknowledges Santiago Torres. Through Equilátera, they've created content for local media and for nonprofit and private organizations, and they also plan to provide social media management services. “We've tried to diversify our sources of income so as not to depend on just one,” she says. “At first, the work was voluntary. Now, we have a part-time journalist, and she gets paid. Columnists are also paid, and our hope is to pay everyone eventually.”

As part of these diversification efforts, Todas has also collaborated with other independent media outlets, such as Puerto Rico's Center for Investigative Journalism (CPI). Together, they have offered workshops for journalists on feminist coverage and launched a new gender-focused investigative unit. In early November, that team published its first investigation, in collaboration with the Miami Herald, revealing an alarmingly low rate of convictions of Puerto Rico policemen who had been arrested on domestic violence charges in the past decade. As part of the investigation, CPI had to sue the Puerto Rico Police Bureau to access public data on how many of these agents were still active and other information on how the agency deals with these cases. After a year in court, reporters were granted access to information that confirmed a poor implementation of domestic violence prevention policies within the force. (Disclosure: I also collaborate with CPI on stories.)

In recent years, as CPI has grown, it has sought to collaborate with other local outlets as well. The nonprofit was founded 10 years before Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico. Its mission: to produce investigative journalism and promote access to public information. “Before the hurricane, we had financing sources that allowed us to grow, increasing our budget from one year to the next, but in a conservative way,” says Carla Minet, CPI's executive director. But “none of us could have prepared to cover an event like Maria and the government's response. That was a defining moment for the center.”

It wasn't easy. First, CPI's reporters — like many across the island — had to focus simply on surviving. In the days after the storm, they had limited access to electricity and gasoline, and little or no cell phone service. But over time, many people came to rely on CPI's post-disaster coverage to understand the public's needs, even as leaders denied the magnitude of the emergency. While the local and federal governments insisted for weeks that the storm had caused less than 70 deaths, reporting from the CPI and other local outlets in the field told the story of funeral homes, crematoriums, and morgues operating at capacity, and locals burying family members in backyards. These were the first indications that the death count — and survivors' needs — were much greater than officially admitted. CPI would eventually work on an award-winning investigation, in collaboration with Quartz and The Associated Press, that revealed hundreds had died in the aftermath of

Over time, many people came to rely on CPI's post-disaster coverage to understand the public's needs, even as leaders denied the magnitude of the emergency

Todas reported on the Puerto Rican government's lack of reliable data to keep track of sexual violence against women. It was immediately evident that people wanted a publication like Todas, Santiago Torres says — the outlet has some 40,000 followers across social networks — but the demand also put a strain on the young publication: “People gave us that approval, sharing our stories and asking for more coverage. ... But we fell into a rhythm of daily coverage, which wasn't what we'd planned. Now we're trying to move away from that pace because we can't keep up with it.” They are now focused on in-depth features that, ideally, would publish weekly or every other week, and long-term investigations.

Despite the public's warm reception, the founders of Todas still work as volunteers, and Santiago Torres acknowledges that growth has been gradual. But she believes in the model and is confident they're beginning to see results.

Unlike many independent outlets, Todas follows a for-profit model, combining grants from philanthropic entities and direct donations from readers with revenue from Equilátera, a branded content agency whose profits go entirely to the project. Santiago Torres, who leads Equilátera's work, said the newsroom keeps editorial independence by following strict ethical guidelines, making sure that, in case they need to cover a story on



Artist Elizabeth Barreto paints a mural in tribute to women basketball players in Puerto Rico. Amary Santiago Torres and Cristina del Mar Quiles decided to launch Todas to cover issues on the island through a feminist lens

Hurricane Maria. It is now believed that around 3,000 people perished from causes directly or indirectly related to the storm and its poorly managed aftermath.

“We didn't see the disaster as an opportunity, but as the months passed, we began to see how organizations found valuable information in our stories — like data and statistics — that informed policy or decisions about the distribution of funds,” explains Minet. “That's when several foundations reached out to the center to support our work.”

Then came the summer of 2019, when CPI published a text chat between Gov. Ricardo Rosselló and close aides mocking the victims of Hurricane Maria, as well as a hard-hitting story about government corruption. The revelations prompted social unrest that led to the ouster of Rosselló. Unprecedented support poured in for CPI, including from citizens who spontaneously organized fundraising campaigns and donations from philanthropic organizations that support journalism.

“The center began to receive a lot of international recognition, which generated income and allowed us to put together a team dedicated strictly to development,” Minet says. “They're not journalists; they dedicate themselves to creating campaigns, looking for opportunities for collaboration.”

With so many untold stories and a pressing need for investigative journalism in Puerto Rico, Minet says it's increasingly important for organizations to share resources and experiences — and to find ways to strengthen journalism as a whole. In addition to its collaboration with Todas — which Minet describes as an outlet that works “with great seriousness, with great rigor” — CPI is hopeful about the revival of La Perla del Sur.

The two newsrooms have collaborated for more than six years, with La Perla del Sur publishing CPI's stories. And in 2016, La Perla del Sur executive editor Alfonso published an investigation with CPI that documented serious health impacts on communities in Puerto Rico and in the Dominican Republic due to exposure to the ash produced by the AES coal plant on Puerto Rico's southern coast. Alfonso won the National Journalism Award from the Puerto Rican Association of Journalists for the investigation.

He says the publication hopes to continue this type of work, telling stories from communities beyond the mainstream media's radar and seeking answers to their questions: “We're going to cover the city, the environment, we're going to be pro-region and pro-country, and we're going to be where no one else is, where no one's paying attention, and where they need us most.” ■

ANA MARÍA ABRUÑA REYES/TODAS/TODASPR.COM

A photograph of a man in a checkered shirt and a baseball cap loading harvested corn onto the bed of a white pickup truck. The scene is set in a field at sunset, with palm trees visible in the background. The corn stalks are golden-brown, and the truck bed is filled with them. The man is seen from the side, working with the corn. The overall tone is warm and golden due to the sunset lighting.

RISEING **TEMPERATURES** **AND THE** **LABOR BEAT**

Focusing on how extreme heat
kills workers — and what should
be done about it — is becoming
increasingly important

BY STEVEN GREENHOUSE



When an extraordinary heat wave hit the Pacific Northwest in June 2021, with temperatures soaring to a record 116 degrees in Portland, it sent a hard-to-ignore message that extreme heat has become an increasing danger — not just in Arizona and Texas, but in northern states, too.

As a result of that heat wave, more than 100 people died in Oregon, and one issue that was repeatedly discussed afterwards was the way extreme heat endangers older Americans and those who live at home without air conditioning. But there was another serious danger that wasn't discussed nearly enough: High heat can be a big problem for the nation's workers, not just farmworkers and construction workers, but delivery workers, utility workers, landscaping workers, and warehouse workers.

A study done last summer by Public Citizen, a research and advocacy group founded by Ralph Nader, estimated that extreme heat contributes to between 600 and 2,000 worker fatalities each year in the United States. Those numbers are likely to grow worse

PREVIOUS SPREAD: BRIAN L. FRANK/
THE NEW YORK TIMES VIA REDUX

DAMIAN DOVARGANES/AP PHOTO

because climate experts predict that the number of days with unsafe heat conditions will double between now and 2050. As global warming worsens, the world will see more intense droughts, longer heat waves, more severe storms, rising sea levels, melting glaciers, and more difficult conditions for many workers — especially for outdoor workers like agricultural workers, delivery drivers, and construction workers. Intense heat can cause, among other things, heat stroke, cardiac events, and kidney failure. “This is a very serious and growing problem with more high heat days this year and the highest temperatures on record in many states,” says Ellen Wides, former chief of the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health and senior advisor to the University

of California Merced's Community and Labor Center. “We're also seeing extreme heat in parts of the country that have rarely or never experienced high heat.”

Amid growing worries about heat, many occupational safety experts criticize the federal government for not issuing an occupational heat stress rule or standard that would protect workers from extreme heat, perhaps by requiring shade, water, and rest breaks whenever temperatures hit a certain level.

Many occupational safety experts also fault the media, saying news organizations have done too few stories about this threat to workers and done too little to educate the public about it. “The problem is huge, and the media sometimes they just don't get the breadth of it. There's a failure to see how it's affecting many workers,” says Juley Fulcher, a worker health and safety advocate at Public Citizen. “The media is there the moment there is a heat wave. That's when they show up. The problem is the media isn't there any other time to cover this problem.”

Some safety experts say one reason the media — and the nation — pay so little attention to the threat that high heat poses for workers is that the hardest hit occupational group is farmworkers, a group that society often overlooks, partly because it's largely comprised of low-paid immigrants.

Extreme heat often sneaks up on workers and can be deadly. A handful of media organizations have taken a close look at the problem.

Sebastian Perez, 38, collapsed and died during the 2021 heat wave in Oregon. An in-depth article in Rolling Stone described how he was working alone in a field in the Willamette Valley, moving 30-pound irrigation pipes to help ensure that young trees survived the heat wave. Temperatures rose to well over 100 degrees that afternoon, and when Perez's co-workers began a search for him after he didn't answer his phone, they found him slumped on the ground, barely breathing. He died before the ambulance arrived.

With the mercury heading toward 88, firefighter Yaroslav “Yaro” Katkov, a 28-year-old immigrant from Ukraine, was doing a standard training exercise, hiking

a 1.45-mile loop in a mountainous area halfway between Los Angeles and San Diego, NPR reported. Even though Katkov was lagging badly behind the others, the fire captain ordered the squad to repeat the loop. Katkov soon collapsed and was airlifted to a hospital. He died the next day from “heat illness,” according to NPR.

On a July day that hit 96 degrees, Karl Simmons, a 30-year-old African-American Navy veteran, collapsed while working in Fort Worth to patch the turf of a soccer field. A passerby saw Simmons sprawled on the ground, facedown, and alerted his co-workers. He was rushed to a hospital but died from heat stroke. According to an article by Columbia Journalism Investigations and the Texas Newsroom, “His body temperature registered 107.1 degrees — high enough to shut down internal organs such as the heart and kidneys.”

“One thing that is so important to get across is the craziness of this — this is all preventable,” says

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Field worker
Guillermo Zamaripa
cuts corn for his
horse in California's
San Joaquin Valley,
Aug. 2020. More
frequent heat waves
and smoke from
wildfires have made
working conditions
more dangerous
for farmworkers in
California

**LEFT: Construction
workers clean
the floor of a
steel structure in
triple-digit heat
in downtown Los
Angeles, Sept. 2022**

As the Amazon warehouse where Karen Salasky worked grew hot, her production dropped, she felt ill and, she said, her temporary job was terminated



Julia Shipley, a former investigative reporting fellow at Columbia Journalism School who was part of the team that did a year-long project about extreme heat and workers that looked into Simmons’ and Katkov’s deaths. “These workers arrive at their job in the morning. They’re healthy and functioning people. They kiss their wife or husband good-bye. They wave to their kids going off to school. ... They’re human beings like you and me, and they’re dead by the end of the day. It’s crazy to take a human being who’s healthy, and through this process of ... rising core temperatures and bodily efforts and the lack of water and the lack of shade and the lack of breaks and the lack of attention, they suddenly die. It’s so insidious. When a worker is crushed by a bulldozer, you can see that. This is much more surreptitious, yet all the more urgent because of that.”

This increased discussion about the effect of heat on U.S. workers comes at the same time a huge controversy erupted in Qatar about the deaths of migrant workers who constructed the stadiums, roads, hotels,

and apartment buildings for the World Cup competition. The Guardian reported that hundreds of migrant construction workers died annually from heat stress in recent years in Qatar as they worked in heat as high as 113 degrees. Indeed, as temperatures rise across the globe, there are more reports and studies about workers dying and suffering from heat in country after country, including China, Singapore, and Spain.

Job safety experts emphasize that high temperatures can endanger not just outdoor workers, but also indoor workers, such as bakery workers and workers in commercial kitchens. Perhaps the most publicized example came a little over a decade ago when The Morning Call in Allentown did an exposé about an Amazon fulfillment center in Pennsylvania’s Lehigh Valley. “During summer heat waves, Amazon arranged to have paramedics parked in ambulances outside, ready to treat any workers who dehydrated or suffered other forms of heat stress,” the paper reported. “Those who couldn’t quickly cool off and return to work were sent home or taken out

APRIL BARTHOLOMEW/THE MORNING CALL

in stretchers and wheelchairs and transported to area hospitals.” At one point, the temperature-humidity index inside the warehouse reached 114 degrees.

After that exposé, Amazon added more air conditioning in its warehouses, but many Amazon workers still complain of heat problems. This past August, workers at an Amazon air freight warehouse in San Bernardino, California, walked off the job to demand higher pay and better safety measures against the heat. The Washington Post wrote that local temperatures “often reached above 100 degrees this summer, causing heat-related illness in particular for workers who are outdoors loading and unloading planes.”

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 30 workers die in the U.S. each year directly from the heat. But many experts say the official numbers significantly understate the total and the overall problem.

David Michaels, who was assistant secretary of labor for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration under President Obama, said heat fatalities are under-

counted because the authorities count deaths as caused by heat only when the victim has been taken to a hospital and their body temperature is measured. “It can be very difficult to attribute a death to heat,” says Michaels, an epidemiologist now teaching at the George Washington University School of Public Health. He notes that it’s

“During summer heat waves, Amazon arranged to have

easy to blame other causes, such as heart attacks or respiratory conditions. “Extreme heat causes the body to become so hot that it stops functioning,” Michaels adds.

Public Citizen’s report said that “environmental heat is likely responsible for 170,000 work-related injuries every year, and possibly many more.” For instance, high heat can make workers dizzy or faint, and that can cause workers who operate machines to make mistakes that can seriously injure them or their coworkers.

Widess says the media could do far more to educate workers, employers, and the public about extreme heat. “It would be good to cover the scientific evidence to make it more of an acknowledged problem, not a random thing — not a high heat day here and there, but a kind of relentless or ongoing problem,” she says. “Better media coverage could pressure employers to take the necessary steps to help workers. Better media coverage could put more pressure on policymakers to adopt rules or standards, to act in the void of federal inaction.”

California, Oregon, Washington, and Minnesota are among the only states that have adopted heat standards requiring employers to take specific steps in hot weather — such as giving periodic breaks to cool off. (Colorado recently created one specifically to protect farm workers.) Worker advocates like Widess hope that other states will soon adopt such standards.

Public Citizen’s Fulcher says the media could play a valuable role in reducing heat deaths and illnesses. “The media should really start focusing stories on this in the spring or early in the summer,” she says. “You want to do a lot of advance awareness before, rather than after, raising awareness among the general public.”

The occasional stories about workers dying from heat stress indicate that employee and employer alike often paid scant attention to heat’s potential dangers. A Los Angeles area postal worker, 63, Peggy Frank, died after temperatures in her mail truck climbed to 117 degrees. On a day when the heat index hit 90, a 47-year-old laborer died on his third day on the job, doing roofing work at a high school in Jefferson City, Missouri. A day after he turned 24, Esteban Chavez Jr., a UPS driver, passed out in his truck and died after finishing the last delivery on his route in Pasadena, California. The temperature was in the upper 90s. In an area where one wouldn’t expect heat deaths — upstate New York — Tim Barber, 35, died on the second day on his construction job. He was working in 95-degree heat on a bridge project over the Genesee River near Rochester. (A disproportionate number of workers who die are new workers, not acclimated to working in high heat.)

If workers and employers are educated to recognize the symptoms of heat exhaustion — which pre-

paramedics

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forms of heat

stress”

FROM A REPORT IN THE
ALLENTOWN
MORNING CALL

cedes heat stroke — that could help save workers’ lives. Symptoms of heat exhaustion include heavy sweating, dizziness, rapid pulse, muscle cramps, fatigue, headaches, and goose bumps. Heat stroke’s symptoms include an altered mental state, vomiting, nausea, rapid breathing, and a very rapid heart rate.

There are many worthwhile stories to be done about extreme heat. One could explore why such a disproportionate number of workers who die from heat are Black or Brown, like Perez and Simmons. Another focus could be why the federal government has never adopted a heat standard, even though the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health first called for such heat-stress rules in 1972. After previous administrations failed to act to create a standard, the Biden administration announced in September 2021 a plan to draft workplace heat regulations, but the process, which involves several rounds of soliciting public comment, could take five years.

“The people who die, they can’t be just workers, they have to be

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... He died in a

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**Julia Shipley, former
investigative reporting
fellow**

Some occupational safety experts argue that the media should examine what they say is insufficient enforcement to protect workers from heat. Several say that federal OSHA and Cal/OSHA are badly understaffed and need more inspectors to investigate heat-induced deaths and illnesses. Another problem: Even when OSHA levies fines against an employer for failing to prevent a worker’s death, judges sometimes overturn those fines, saying employers shouldn’t be punished when there aren’t specific federal heat regulations stating what an employer’s obligations are in such situations.

David Nickerson, a data journalist with the Bay Area News Group in California who worked on the Columbia investigation team with Shipley, has done extensive reporting on extreme heat. He suggests that journalists do more accountability stories that examine whether government safety officials have followed up on ensuring safety improvements after a workers’ heat death and whether companies where a worker died have taken the promised steps to prevent future heat deaths.

Speaking about Hellas Construction, the company that employed Simmons, Nickerson says, “It was remarkable that what happened with Hellas is a worker died from heat, and then OSHA inspected the company and there was an agreement to stop this from happening again. But the company did not fully follow up. When a worker named Pedro Martinez Jr. came in a year later, on his third day at work again there was no shade and again there was limited water, and that day another worker died.”

Another focus for reporters could be the extensive industry opposition to creating federal heat regulations, whether from agricultural employers or warehouse companies. For instance, the National Cotton Council strongly opposes Biden’s plan to adopt a heat standard, saying, “Agriculture is not an industry that can be successfully regimented as some other industries have been.”

Michelle Tigchelaar, co-author of a major report on heat risks for farmworkers, says more coverage is needed about extreme heat’s threat to farmworkers.



Not only do they often work in searing temperatures without any shade, she says, but “these workers have little agency to set their own schedule or pace when it’s extremely hot because they’re paid by the piece,” and that creates considerable pressure to rush and work long hours. Moreover, Tigchelaar says, many farmworkers are scared to speak up about dangers like high heat because they’re on H-2A temporary visas and can be deported if their employer fires them.

“Another problem,” according to Tigchelaar, “is the farm owners who need to provide housing, and it’s often not equipped with air conditioning or other ways people can cool off at night. That leaves workers more vulnerable to high heat the next day.”

NATHAN HOWARD/AP PHOTO

Safety experts say it would be helpful if the media did more stories about model employers or programs that do a good job protecting workers from heat. Some farms and construction companies begin their workday at 4 a.m. or so and try to end work around noon, sparing workers from toiling in the hottest afternoon hours.

Julia Shipley, the reporting fellow at Columbia Journalism School, sees one thing as key to writing stories about heat’s dangers and heat deaths: You have to take a deep dive and describe the whole person, she says. Shipley and her team wrote about Cruz Urias-Beltran, a 52-year-old immigrant from Mexico who collapsed and died while working on a Nebraska cornfield on a 91-degree day in July. “His core body temperature was 108

degrees — hot enough for the brain, liver and kidneys to shut down,” they wrote. Shipley noted that Urias-Beltran had traveled 1,300 miles from Arizona to take the Nebraska job because he was eager to earn money to buy his daughter a gown for her high school graduation.

To get readers to care, Shipley explains, “They have to meet and get to know, through the writing, the person who dies. You need the data and statistics, but it really helps to make the readers grieve. These people who die, they can’t be just workers, they have to be people you know. That’s why you take a deep dive about who that whole person was. He died in the cornfield to buy a graduation dress for his daughter. That’s as core to the story as what his body temperature was.” ■

**Pedro Lucas (center)
is the nephew
of farm worker
Sebastian Francisco
Perez, who died
while working in
an extreme heat
wave, near St. Paul,
Oregon in July 2021**

NIEMAN
NOTES

1967

Philip Meyer was honored recently at the Brazilian Conference on Data Journalism and Digital Methods (Coda.Br) in São Paulo. An exhibition at the conference, “50 Years of Precision Journalism: A Tribute to Philip Meyer,” featured photos, documents, and books written by Meyer, who developed the concept of precision journalism during his Nieman Fellowship at Harvard.

1977

José Antonio Martínez Soler recently received the 2022 Honor Award from the Madrid Press Association for his lifetime achievements in journalism. The group recognized him as a “tireless, risk-taking, committed and courageous professional, not only in the practice of journalism but as an entrepreneur and founder of different publications.” He also was director of the National News Agency EFE.

1988

Dale Maharidge was a scriptwriter on two episodes of “Lucy,” the third season of the Turner Classic Movies podcast “The Plot Thickens,” which tells the life story of actress and producer Lucille Ball. The series won two inaugural Signal Awards from the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences.

2001

J. R. Moehringer was the ghostwriter for “Spare” (Penguin Random House, January 2023), the memoir by Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, that reveals intimate details of his life and his experiences as a member of the British royal family.

2006

Mary C. Curtis won a Clarion Award for her Roll Call columns from the Association for Women in Communications in the online journalism/regular columns category. She also won a Salute to Excellence Award from the National Association of Black Journalists in the digital media commentary/weblog category.

2007

James M. Scott is author of “Black Snow: Curtis LeMay, the Firebombing of Tokyo, and the Road to the Atomic Bomb” (W. W.

Norton & Company), a reconstruction of the American air attack on Tokyo on the night of March 9, 1945, which destroyed 16 square miles of the city and killed 100,000 men, women, and children.

2008

Dan Vergano has started a new position as a senior opinion editor at Scientific American. He previously was a science reporter at Grid and BuzzFeed and was a senior writer-editor at National Geographic.

Olivera Perkins is now the economics reporter for Signal Cleveland, a nonprofit newsroom that fuses community building with local news reporting. She previously covered labor, employment, and workforce issues at The Plain Dealer in Cleveland, Ohio.

2012

Tyler Bridges is author of “Five Laterals and a Trombone: Cal, Stanford and the Wildest Ending in College Football History” (Triumph Books), a book about a famous moment in sports history.

2013

Mary Beth Sheridan will start a new role in April as The Washington Post’s Mexico City bureau chief. She has been reporting from Mexico and Central America as a correspondent for The Post, where she previously covered diplomacy, homeland security, and immigration. She served as deputy foreign editor from 2016 to 2018. She joined The Post in 2001.

2014

Alissa Richardson, Ph.D., associate professor of journalism at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School and a 2014 Visiting Nieman Fellow, has launched the Charlotta Bass Journalism & Justice Lab, the West Coast’s first extended reality (XR) Black media archive and experimental storytelling space.

Anna Fifield is returning to The Washington Post in January to become Asia-Pacific editor, overseeing coverage of a region increasingly influenced by China. Fifield previously spent two decades as a foreign correspondent, first for the Financial Times and then at The Post, in Sydney, Seoul, Beirut, Washington, Tokyo and Beijing, where she served as The Post’s China bureau chief until 2020. She is currently editor of the Dominion Post in New Zealand.

Wendell Steavenson, a foreign correspondent who has been reporting on the war in Ukraine for The Economist’s 1843 Magazine, is author of the new novel “Margot” (W. W. Norton, January 2023), a coming-of-age novel set in the 1950s and ’60s on the North Shore of Long Island.

2016

Debra Adams Simmons, executive editor of history and culture at National Geographic Magazine and former editor of The Plain Dealer in Cleveland and the Akron Beacon Journal, has joined the board of the Ohio Local News Initiative. The network recently launched the nonprofit news site Signal Cleveland.

Christopher Weyant, a cartoonist for The New Yorker, and his wife, author Anna Kang, have won an Outstanding Author and Illustrator Award from the New Jersey Association of School Librarians for their children’s books.

2017

Felicia Fonseca has been promoted to assistant news director for the Southwest, overseeing text, video, and photo coverage for The Associated Press in New Mexico, Nevada, and Arizona. Based in Flagstaff, Arizona, she previously was AP’s Indigenous affairs reporter/northern Arizona correspondent.

Jason Rezaian, a writer for The Washington Post’s Global Opinions section, is a Spring 2023 Resident Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School’s Institute of Politics. He will lead a study group focused on international journalism.

2018

Jamieson Lesko has joined The Wall Street Journal as executive producer of International. Based in London, she will oversee teams there and in Singapore. She joins The Journal with decades of international reporting experience and news production leadership at NBC News, MSNBC, and CNN.

Christine Mungai, curator of the Baraza Media Lab in Kenya — together with Thompson Reuters — has launched the She Leads Media: Bettina Fellowship. The new program will provide training and mentoring to women working in journalism and media in East Africa, with the goal of empowering them to strive

Longtime Time Magazine Correspondent,
Jerrold L. Schecter, NF ’64, dies at 90
He helped acquire Nikita Khrushchev’s revelatory
audio diaries and served as associate White House
press secretary under President Jimmy Carter

Jerrold L. Schecter, a 1964 Nieman Fellow who reported from Asia, the Soviet Union and the White House for Time magazine and wrote for several other publications, died at his home in Washington, D.C., on Feb. 6, 2023, at age 90.

Born in 1932 in New York City, he graduated from high school in the Bronx and earned a bachelor’s degree at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where he worked on the school newspaper with his future wife, Leona Protas. After graduating, he served in the Navy in Japan and Korea.

Early in his journalism career, Schecter worked briefly for The Wall Street Journal as a staff correspondent before joining Time magazine in 1958. There, he served as contributing editor and then a staff correspondent covering China, Southeast Asia, and Hong Kong. After his Nieman Fellowship in 1963–64, he served as the Time-Life bureau chief in Tokyo, before becoming Time’s bureau chief in Moscow and later Time’s White House correspondent and diplomatic editor. He also worked as Washington editor and foreign affairs columnist for Esquire in the 1980s.

Schecter notably helped in the



publication of “Khrushchev Remembers,” which first appeared in Life magazine and as a Little, Brown book in 1970. Based on a series of audio tapes recorded by former Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev after he was ousted from power, it was the first account by a Soviet leader to reveal the inner workings of the Kremlin.

As Schecter recalled in Nieman Reports: “As Time magazine’s Moscow bureau chief, I was instrumental in acquiring and secretly validating the

authenticity of Khrushchev’s terrifying revelations of how Stalin’s excesses led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a journalist, I struggled to confirm the authenticity of the tapes. Time had them all voice-printed to confirm that they matched Khrushchev’s voice at a United Nations speech in New York City. ... What I took away from the memoirs, which turned into a total of three volumes, was that Khrushchev played an instrumental role in destroying Soviet communism with his revelations, which he intended to salvage and restore his own place in history.”

In the late 1970s, he served as associate White House press secretary and spokesman for the National Security Council under President Jimmy Carter.

In the early 1980s, he was vice president for public affairs at Occidental Petroleum Company.

Schecter stood by assertions made in his book “Special Tasks: The Memoirs of an Unwanted Witness — a Soviet Spymaster” (Little, Brown, 1994) — written with KGB officer Pavel Sudoplatov, his son Anatoli Sudoplatov, and Leona Schecter — that nuclear scientists had shared information with the Soviets. Both the FBI and the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service denied the validity of the claims.

He leaves his wife Leona Schecter, their five children, Evelind Schecter, Steven Schecter, Kate Schecter, Doveen Schecter and Barnet Schecter, 10 grandchildren and three great-granddaughters. ■

for senior roles in their fields and build sustainable networks.

2019

Mary Ellen Klas and her colleagues Sarah Blaskey, Nicholas Nehamas, Ana Ceballos, and other staff at the Miami Herald won the award for political reporting for exposing the role Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis played in sending two flights with 49 South American refugees — deceived with false promises of employment — from Texas to Martha’s Vineyard.

Myroslava Gongadze, Eastern Europe chief at the Voice of America, has won the 2023 Inamori Ethics Prize, presented by the Inamori International Center for Ethics and Excellence at Case Western

Reserve University.

Heather Hendershot, a professor of film and media in MIT’s Comparative Media Studies/Writing program and a 2019 visiting Nieman Fellow, is author of “When the News Broke: Chicago 1968 and the Polarizing of America” (University of Chicago Press, February 2023). In the book, she explores how anger at the media became part of America’s culture wars.

2020

Anne Godlasky has been named president of the National Press Foundation. She joined NPF in December 2021 as director of journalism training. Since then, she has led the organization’s flagship Paul Miller Washington Reporting

Fellowship, as well as intensive journalism training programs on statehouse reporting, data journalism, global trade, criminal justice, and data privacy.

Karyn Pugliese is the new editor-in-chief of Canada’s National Observer. She was the 2020 Martin Wise Goodman Canadian Nieman Fellow and in 2021 joined CNO as a columnist and executive editor.

2023

Dotun Akintoye, a staff writer at ESPN, is featured in “The Best American Magazine Writing 2022” (Columbia University Press, November 2022). His article “Is Jake Paul Bad for Boxing? Next Question” was a finalist in the profile writing category. ■



Sheikh Sabiha Alam carved out space in Bangladesh's media to cover human rights violations

“I Carry the Tears of Victims”

Sheikh Sabiha Alam, NF '23, on covering human rights violations in the narrow space left for independent journalism

Day at our house in the northeast-ern part of Bangladesh would break with a rally of sounds.

First, it was Azan, the call to prayer from the mosque. Then came my dad's recitation from the Holy Quran, tinkling sounds from the kitchen, some music on the radio, and my mother humming along with it. I resisted all those sounds, pressing the pillow over my ears, reluctant to wake up for school. When the signature tune of BBC Bangla came on, though, I knew that was the last call for me to get out of bed.

In Bangladesh in the mid-80s, children like me from middle-class and lower middle-class families used to listen to bedtime stories and lullabies from our mothers. The stories were essentially fairy tales from Bengal or the Soviet Union; very few of us heard Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales or fairy tales from Japan or Africa. My siblings and I could not always align our lives with the fairy tale characters. There was always some tension, a distinct kind that hovers over every refugee family.

My parents left their home in India after the great partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 and moved to the eastern part of Bengal, now Bangladesh, which became independent in 1971. For the

rest of their lives, my parents found it hard to make ends meet. They wanted us to leave a mark on the world. So, they introduced us to the Abrahamic prophets, the gods and goddesses from the Indian epic Ramayana, the speeches of Abraham Lincoln and Mahatma Gandhi, and cultural figures like Michael Jackson and Muhammad Ali.

We would read the newspaper aloud as a family. And as a teenager, I decided to become a journalist like BBC correspondent Lyse Doucet, whom I greatly admired.

Newspapers and radio played a defiant role in Bangladesh's liberation war. But just four years after independence, the government banned publication of all newspapers except four, which were controlled by the state. Censorship, the murder and persecution of reporters, and poor salaries were the norm.

The situation hasn't changed much. According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Bangladesh ranked 162 out of 180 countries in its World Press Freedom Index. Reporters are routinely harassed; perpetrators enjoy impunity and often receive encouragement from the powerful. In 2020, journalist Golam Sarwar was sent to a secret detention center for writing a

story against land grabbers. The same year, kidnappers took photojournalist Shafiqul Islam Kajal in front of his office, and he remained missing for 53 days until he was released. Police arrested journalist Rozina Islam for allegedly stealing documents and sent her to prison.

In addition, newsrooms are still dominated by men. Only a handful of women are in leadership positions, and in most cases, they don't get a chance to advance in their careers.

I started my career at bdnews24, Bangladesh's first online newspaper, then moved on to stints at The Daily Star and BBC Bangla, before joining Prothom Alo, the largest Bengali daily. Over the past 17 years, I've witnessed and covered major events that shaped the history of Bangladesh — the 2013 collapse of Rana Plaza that claimed over one thousand lives, cyclones and floods, ISIS attacks, and state-sponsored brutality against dissidents. Then came the pandemic. The media industry in Bangladesh was already going through a rough patch and, like in so many newsrooms around the world, Covid-19 just made things worse. During the same period, my phone was hacked, and a private conversation was released that caused me public embarrassment and tensions in my newsroom.

Some advised me to quit journalism. But how could I do that? I carry the tears of victims — their anguish, anger, despair, and disbelief. Storytelling is the only tool to relieve this burden.

One of the poems I read as a child was Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." The ancient mariner killed an albatross — a good omen at sea — on a whim, and his ship immediately became becalmed. Angry sailors hung the dead albatross around the ancient mariner's neck. And with the dead albatross hanging from his neck, the ancient mariner watched his fellow sailors dying one by one.

During this difficult period, I felt like the ancient mariner. It felt like watching the end of my career. But the Nieman fellowship has put fresh wind in my sails. The space for independent journalism in Bangladesh is narrow, and any new outlet requires government approval. But after the fellowship, I will return to my readers at Prothom Alo, focusing my stories on human rights violations, stories that otherwise might go untold. I still have many stories to tell. As Coleridge wrote, "Till my ghastly tale is told, this heart within me burns." ■



AFTERIMAGE

Facing Hunger — and Death — In Somalia

A combination of drought, armed conflict, and ineffective government is making life a type of torture for the most vulnerable

BY ANDREA BRUCE

I sat next to Faduma in her tent in Baidoa, Somalia, the morning after her three-year-old daughter Hawa died from malnutrition. She caressed and touched two of her remaining children, over and over, in shock. She sang to them, kissed them, talked to them as if they might leave her at any second. Anisa, who is four years old, was sick and lay silently behind her.

Faduma answered our questions but barely acknowledged us. The reporter on assignment with me asked what she wished for. "I'm begging Allah not to take another baby from me," she told us.

This time with Faduma struck me to my core. I am a mother, and her

distress was palpable. There are tens of thousands of tents around Baidoa, Somalia, full of children and families attempting to escape famine. Every tent has a similar story.

Since the beginning of 2021, more than 165,000 refugees have fled to Baidoa looking for help due to Somalia's worst drought in four decades. Over eight million Somalis are at risk of food insecurity, and at least 1.4 million children have experienced "acute malnutrition," according to the U.N. In Baidoa, I witnessed hospitals filling with starving children suffering from measles, pneumonia, and other diseases that prey on the weak.

After five failed rainy seasons, Somalia hasn't seen the precipitation needed to support agriculture. Enough to grow grass on the side of the road, but not enough to sustain a farm for long. Because of this rain, men left their tents and families to return to their farms and attempt to bring them back to life.

Drought, the ongoing conflict with terrorist organization Al Shabab, and an ineffective government has made the current famine in Somalia a type of torture for the everyday people who live there. That's especially true for the mothers left with little to keep their children alive. ■

Faduma sits in her tent in Baidoa, Somalia, the morning after her three-year-old daughter Hawa died from malnutrition

**“We do our job while we
can. When it becomes
impossible, we’ll think
about something else.”**

ROMAN ANIN | Stories

